"Kelly's Heroes"

The outrageous adventure of a handful of GIs on their own secret mission — for God, for country, and the All-American buck...

Burt Hirschfeld

e d the novel—See the smash-hit MGM film
starring

(stwood, Telly Savalas, Don Rickles,
'l O'Connor and Donald Sutherland

Kelly's . . . Heroes?

Kelly took a gold bar from the attaché case and dropped it on Crapgame's papers. The seamy little man stared at it, then picked up the phone and cranked.

"Get me a quotation on the Paris gold market." His voice was crisp and business-like. He eyed Kelly. "How much more where this came from?"

"Four thousand bars."

"And where is all this gold?"

"In a bank. In a bank behind enemy lines."

A look of bliss came over Crapgame's face. "That," he said with quiet respect, "could be the perfect crime."

A PACK OF GIs ON W. W. II's MOST OUTRAGEOUS MISSION . . . READ THE NOVEL—THEN SEE CLINT EASTWOOD AS KELLY AND DON RICKLES AS CRAP-GAME IN THE RIOTOUS NEW MGM MOVIE!

"Kelly's Heroes"

BURT HIRSCHFELD

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A LANCER BOOK

KELLY'S HEROES

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PREFACE

In World War II, during the period following the breakout at St. Lo and the Liberation of Paris, the Third U.S. Army made its fighting dash to Germany's Rhine River. In the vanguard of the Third Army were numerous reconnaissance companies. These Armored Cavalry units moved with the situation, probing, fighting and developing contact with the enemy far beyond the main body. Their tactics were as unpredictable as the front, which was, to say the least, fluid. Such a company—and its equally unpredictable personnel—is the subject of this story; a story of a somewhat questionable mission that aimed to deny to the German Army a huge treasure trove of more bombs and bullets, and at the same time to provide aid, comfort, and a large slice of wealth to a group of wild, enterprising G.I.'s.

The Warriors . . . Kelly's Warriors . . .

I

A lousy night. Rain slanted down in never-ending sheets that left men drenched and transformed dirt roads into rutted obstacle courses for vehicles. The crossroads, like a monstrous marker meant to signify the middle of France, were alive with traffic, huge military lorries slipping and sliding, Mercedes engines groaning as drive wheels failed to gain a grip on the mud. A German military policeman, face glistening in the masked glow of blackout lights, cursed in Berlin street German and waved his arms frantically, trying to get the convoy moving again toward the front.

"Idiot!" he roared at the driver of the stalled truck who tore up the already scarred road with spinning rear wheels. "Idiot, you should be shot. Cut to the left, the *left!*"

The driver heard and obeyed. In time, the wheels grabbed and the truck inched onto firm ground, grabbed, then rolled ahead. The convoy began to move with some purpose. The military cop grunted, and signaled the trucks on, paying no attention to the dull crump of big guns in the distance, nor to the sharper crackle of machine-gun fire. The sounds of war had become commonplace and could be lived with . . .

The American Army jeep squatted at the side of the road in the darkness, an alien visitor, a muddied observer of the mechanical preparations for the killing. It sat with lights out, anxious and insignificant, weary, but alert, rainwater draining off the canvas top.

Kelly, a lean man in a poncho and helmet, slumped behind the wheel, looking more like a bored suburbanite stalled on a California freeway than an American soldier. His face, long and strong-featured, showed nothing, but his eyes peered through the streaked windshield, missing nothing. He revved the jeep's engine, to be sure it would respond when needed.

Seated next to Kelly, Emil Dankhopf cut a much more imposing military figure than the American. He wore the uniform of a colonel in the German regular Army with pride, showing nothing of what he felt in this peculiar situation. His pudgy Aryan face displayed no emotion, though his brain was active, seeking the correct instant in which to turn events to his advantage. At the moment, however, he held himself very still, very obedient, operating under a distinct handicap.

The handicap's name was Private First Class Mitchell and he held a .45 automatic in his nervous fist, the muzzle buried firmly in Colonel Dankhopf's neck. PFC Mitchell was neither as militarily correct as the colonel nor as insouciant as Kelly about his present plight and he showed it. Mitchell's eyes darted and he was sweating.

"Christ, Kelly," he muttered. "How long we gonna sit here?"

"As soon as the convoy's gone—"

"Worse than crosstown traffic in New York," Mitchell complained.

Colonel Dankhopf looked at Mitchell, then at Kelly. A thin smile came onto his proud face. "This is impossible, you know. You must get caught. Surrender to me now and I assure you—"

"Keep the Kraut quiet," Kelly growled.

Mitchell pushed the .45 deeper into the German's neck. The colonel lapsed into silence.

"Well," Mitchell said finally. "Are you gonna do something or what?"

"What?"

Mitchell sweated harder. "Blow your horn, at least. Give that dumb cop a goose, at least."

Kelly pushed down on the horn.

The military policeman glared in the direction of the jeep, tried to see through the damp darkness. Perhaps it was a command car loaded with higher ranks, impatient to be on their way; or perhaps some rowdy infantrymen with little respect for authority. He continued to direct the convoy.

A shell screamed through the night, landed beyond the road, sending up clumps of sod and splattering the jeep with dirty water. Mitchell swore and Kelly leaned on the horn again.

The military policeman directed a stern finger in his direction, beckoned, motioned for him to proceed. Kelly shifted into gear and the jeep bounced across the ditch onto the road. He stepped down heavily on the gas and swung past the M.P. whose eyes went wide as he identified the vehicle as American. He unslung his machine pistol, starting after the speeding jeep, shouting. But it was too late.

"We made it!" Mitchell exulted.

"You will never make it," Colonel Dankhopf declared with Teutonic certainty. "You will be killed by German soldiers."

Mitchell shoved the .45 deeper into the colonel's neck. "After you, Fritz, after you . . ."

"Maybe he's right," Kelly mumbled. "Troops up ahead."

At once they were speeding along a narrow stretch of road, lined with Nazi troopers making their way

toward the battle lines. Splashing mud in every direction, the jeep lurched on, gutteral oaths trailing after them.

Kelly swung to the right and minutes later they were careening through a German field kitchen. Men with mess gear scattered, shaking their fists at the disappearing vehicle.

Along a rutted country lane, across a gently rolling meadow, up one hill and down the other side. Ahead, a barn and in the open doorway, two German soldiers setting up a machine gun, loading it.

"It ends for you here," Colonel Dankhopf gloated.

Kelly bent over the wheel and pressed the gas pedal to the floor. The machine gunners dived for safety as the jeep roared into the barn and out the back.

Minutes later, two men with rifles appeared out of slit trenches, watching the jeep come on with cautious interest.

"Dogfaces," Kelly said.

Mitchell laughed. "We made it!"

Colonel Dankhopf straightened up in his seat and assumed his most correct military posture. The situation was not to his advantage.

The jeep bounced across a railroad track, picked its way through an area pitted with the scars of a mortar attack, past a half-track whose guns were sending bright bolts of tracers into the not so distant hills.

Kelly braked the jeep and got out. Dankhopf followed, still under Mitchell's gun. Kelly pointed to a barn nearby.

"Inside, Colonel," he said flatly. His eyes went to the attaché case in Dankhopf's right hand. "And don't drop the luggage. I'm anxious to take a look-see inside."

"Move," Mitchell commanded.

The German did.

II

It was cold inside the barn, cold and damp and the violent promise of war intruded. Two trucks were visible, and a half-track armed with a pair of rocket launchers, the contemporary sculpture of death, carefully attended, clean and shining. Beyond them, a jeep, crammed with command equipment. Yellow field lamps hung like Halloween lanterns, giving out a shimmering yellow light. And wherever space permitted, soldiers wrapped in blankets slept. Or tried to sleep.

Sergeant Jake (Big Joe) Diamond leaned over the jeep, talking into the command radio. He was a burly man in his middle forties, his skull shaved smooth, his nose twisted and shapeless, his fleshy face tough and somehow resolute. There was a resigned flatness to his eyes and a bored, cynical edge to his heavy voice as he spoke into the radio.

"I don't think you understand, Mulligan," he said with elaborate patience. "You are dropping your mortar bombs on our position."

As if to emphasize his words, a dull explosion went off outside and the yellow lamps performed a weird dance at the end of their wire hangings. The sleeping men stirred but did not awake.

The radio operator, Little Joe, grinned at Big Joe, but said nothing. His eyes shifted to the barn door which opened to admit Colonel Dankhopf, Mitchell, and Kelly. Big Joe noted their arrival.

"You cannot hear me so good, Mulligan," Big Joe said into the mouthpiece, "because your mortars are

firing at your end and all the bombs are dropping at our end. In Section Bravo Four. No, Mulligan, the Krauts are *not* here. We're here, Mulligan."

Still listening, Big Joe extended his hand. Kelly handed over Dankhopf's wallet and identity card. Outside, a mortar bomb went off. The explosion disturbed one of the soldiers. He swore and pulled the blanket over his head.

Big Joe spoke with some admiration into the radio. "Mulligan, your bombs are coming right down on our nose. No, I don't know where the Krauts are, Mulligan. *Just lift that goddamned* barrage!"

He very gently placed the receiver back in its cradle. Silence descended over the area. They waited. No more explosions. Someone sighed with relief. Now only the occasional chatter of the half-track's twin .50 machine guns could be heard. Big Joe studied the identity card in his hand, glanced at Dankhopf. Only then did he slowly turn to face Kelly.

"I told you to bring me in someone young and beautiful, not some fat, sausage-chewing wino, but some good looking kid."

Kelly's finely detailed face showed nothing. "This guy is important, Joe. He's a colonel in Intelligence."

They all heard it at once, the incoming whistle of a mortar bomb. As one, they went into that half-hunched pose that men experienced in war so frequently assume. The explosion was close and this time the lamps went out. The jeep's siren began to wail and Big Joe glared in the semidarkness at Little Joe, laying on him the responsibility for this noisy indignity. Little Joe located a hammer and beat at the jeep's dashboard until the klaxon went off. The lamps flickered on again and in the yellow light men tried to appear nonchalant.

A soldier entered the barn. "You know this place is

crawling with Krauts," he said, staring at the colonel. "We just shot two sneaking up by the canal."

"Okay, Ford," Big Joe growled. "So what do you want?"

"The half-track's been sideswiped by that mortar, Big Joe. And Sailor's got it bad."

Big Joe looked around the barn. His eyes came to rest on two G.I.'s doing nothing. "Jonesy and Blue, get out there with a litter."

The two men grumbled quietly, but did as they had been told. Ford led them outside.

The radio began to crackle and Little Joe answered. "Mickey Mouse . . . Yeah. Yeah." He looked up at Big Joe. "It's Mulligan. He says he's sorry." Big Joe's eyes were hooded and very still, the fleshy face impassive. Nodding grimly, Little Joe spoke into the mouthpiece. "Mulligan, I tell you, Big Joe's kind of sore at the moment. I think maybe you should take off for a few days. Maybe get out of the neighborhood, y'know . . ."

Big Joe swung around to face Dankhopf. After a moment, he spoke to Kelly. "Does he speak English?"

"Yeah, he's a colonel in the Intell—"

Big Joe cut him off with a gesture. "You told me, Kelly. You told me."

Kelly snapped back. "So why don't you listen?" He moved a few steps away, lit a cigarette, adjusted himself to observe.

Big Joe's mouth turned up at the corners, but the most optimistic of his men would not have characterized that expression as a smile. Big Joe didn't smile very much. He inclined his sleek bald pate toward Colonel Dankhopf. "Well, Colonel, as a big noise in Intelligence, you should be able to tell us about Nancy."

Dankhopf drew himself up in his most exemplary

Prussian style. "Under the Geneva Convention of 1924 you are only permitted to ask my name . . ."

With an understanding expression, Big Joe drew his pistol, placed the muzzle alongside Dankhopf's temple. The colonel blanched.

"I am not interested in the defenses," Big Joe said wearily. "I am interested in hotels. How many are still standing?"

Dankhopf had difficulty in speaking. "There are three . . . two are defended by units of the 3rd . . ."

"Which is the most comfortable?" Big Joe asked.

"I don't know," Dankhopf replied with some defiance.

Big Joe cocked his pistol. "Look, colonel, just think of us as tourists. The best hotel!"

"I think it is called the Majestic."

"Are there hot showers?"

"Yes."

"Soft beds?"

"Yes."

Big Joe released the hammer of his pistol. "What about restaurants?" he wanted to know.

"There was one."

"Where?" Big Joe returned the pistol to its holster. "Where was it?"

"In a little square. The *Place de Rheims*. I don't know."

"Who was the owner?"

"I can't remember his name."

Big Joe snapped his fingers. "The book, Little Joe."

Little Joe pulled a battered travel book out of his rucksack. "This is the Michelin Guide," he explained pleasantly to Colonel Dankhopf who watched him nervously. Little Joe thumbed through the worn

pages. "Ah, here it is. Nancy. Principle curiosities, the cathedral, two stars, the museum of art . . ."

Big Joe snorted impatiently. "Cut the crap! The hotels, what's it say about the hotels?"

"The Majestic rates three stars, a knife and a fork, Big Joe."

Big Joe considered the information, then nodded. "What about women?"

Dankhopf could contain himself no longer. A surge of patriotic fervor flooded his breast and he drew himself up to his full height, tried manfully to suck in his belly. "Gentlemen! You do not understand! The German Army is preparing a counter attack. Nancy will be defended to the last man. You will never have the opportunity to visit there."

Big Joe wrinkled his brow in surprise. "Look, Colonel, we are not worrying about the German Army. We have troubles of our own. You don't seem to understand, to the right there's General Patton. To the left, the British. To the rear is our goddamned artillery. And in case you haven't noticed, it is raining up a storm! The best that can be said for the weather is that our own Air Corps can't blow us to hell because it is too lousy to fly. So what I really care about is who runs the girls in Nancy?"

Colonel Dankhopf hesitated, but not for long. "There is a house. But I cannot give you specific instructions. I . . ."

Big Joe pivoted around to a soldier standing nearby. "Corporal Job, make a note. We keep the colonel with us until we get into Nancy. He can show us the town."

The barn door swung open and a gust of cold wet air drew a chorus of angry shouts.

"You crazy, opening the door!"

"Close the damned door!"

"A man could catch his death of cold!"

Big Joe glared at the newcomer. "What do you want here, Barbara?"

The man spoke almost pleadingly. "How many times do I got to tell you the name's Babra, not Barbara!"

Big Joe's expression turned sour, but he made no reply.

Babra went on quickly. "The captain wants to see you."

Big Joe digested this, reached for his submachine gun. He adjusted a helmet over his big round head and moved toward the door.

Now Kelly, who had been watching and listening from just beyond the circle of yellow light, straightened up, spoke in a slow, sure voice. "Joe, this guy should be taken back for interrogation. He's an important catch."

Big Joe paused. "Kelly, the colonel serves a more strategic purpose by staying with us."

Kelly stared at Big Joe with no change of expression. Big Joe clenched a fist, words exploding out of him. "Dammit! Who is fighting this lousy war, us or headquarters? We are . . . that's who. So we'll keep the Kraut as long as we need him . . ."

Big Joe shouldered his way out of the barn, Babra close behind. Only when they were gone, and the door firmly closed again, did Kelly move, returning to the center of the barn. He took Dankhopf by the elbow, steered him under a light, and studied him with renewed interest. Very carefully, Kelly pulled out the colonel's arm and stretched it flat on a small table, the attaché case still in his hand. A chain ran from the handle of the case to the colonel's wrist. Kelly, a be-

mused expression on his face, straightened up, held out his hand.

"Mitchell," he said, "the chopper."

Mitchell handed Kelly a large double-edged axe and Dankhopf seemed to shrink back as Kelly raised it menacingly. Kelly moved swiftly, the axe driving downward with great force, imbedding itself in the table, cutting the chain in two. Dankhopf yanked his hand back as if burnt.

Kelly pulled the case toward him. He smiled lazily at Dankhopf. "It's very heavy," he commented, expecting no answer and receiving none.

Two zippers fastened the case. Kelly opened the top half, let some papers slip out. He spread them out on the table and flipped through them, scanning those of interest.

"Colonel Emil Dankhopf," he said softly. He looked up quickly and Dankhopf turned away. "All these papers relate to a convoy you are to conduct from France to Germany. The code name is Tannenbaum and its status is top secret. Its contents are not named. Now anything that's top secret just naturally makes me curious."

"Me too," Little Joe put in.

"I have nothing to say," Dankhopf said.

"Come on, Colonel," Kelly persisted. "What are you carrying from here to Germany?"

Dankhopf made no answer.

"You can tell me," Kelly said.

A quick brightness came into Dankhopf's eyes. "It is just files."

"Files?"

"Just files."

"The files of the Abwerht in Paris?" Kelly urged.

"Yes, that's right!" Dankhopf said happily. "I am

merely a clerical member of the Abwerht. I deal only with the paper work. You know how it is with the Army, every thing must have copies. Duplicate. Triplicate. So much red tape."

Kelly fingered the official-looking papers on the table. He lifted one sheet, glanced at it idly, and let it float gently back down. To Dankhopf, it was all very threatening. He shuddered.

"Where is the convoy now?" Kelly wanted to know.

"At Claremont," Dankhopf answered.

"That's some distance from here, isn't it?" When Dankhopf provided no answer, Kelly went on, voice soft but clearly audible in the stillness of the barn. "What are you doing in this area, Colonel?"

Dankhopf cleared his throat. "I needed spare parts for some of my trucks. The bombing, you see. Many of the trucks do not function so well now. I was searching for . . ." He broke off, eyes frozen on Kelly's hands, now unzipping the bottom half of the attaché case. Two bars of greyish metal fell onto the table.

Kelly stared at them for a long silent moment. "What are these, colonel?"

"Bars of lead," Dankhopf said smoothly. "In case of capture the bag was to have been thrown into the nearest water. Unfortunately, you surprised me and I did not have the opportunity to dispose of—"

Kelly reached into the case, searched it thoroughly. It was empty. He picked up one of the metal bars, hefted it thoughtfully, looked up at Colonel Dankhopf who met his gaze steadily. Kelly sat down and lit a cigarette, still staring at the German. He dragged deeply, inhaled, allowed the smoke to drift out of his nostrils. Very slowly, he pushed himself erect, moved past the colonel to the jeep, felt around in the back.

When he came back to the table, he carried a bottle of whiskey. He uncorked it and drank, placed it carefully on the table in front of Dankhopf.

"Drink," he said.

Dankhopf shook his head.

Kelly drew out his pistol, pointed it carelessly in the direction of Dankhopf's ample stomach. "I want you to drink," he said, not unkindly.

"Drink?" Dankhopf replied.

"Yeah, the whole bottle. I want us to have a nice little sociable talk. *Ein kleines Gespräch haben*," he repeated in his badly accented German. There was an undertone of menace in his voice.

Dankhopf glanced at the pistol and raised the bottle. "Your good health," he said weakly, and began to drink.

III

It was dark and uninviting out by the canal. The rain was coming down harder and there was always the danger of an incoming German round. Or one of Mulligan's damned mortar patterns. And neither Big Joe nor Babra wanted to get down in that thick goop that passed for the soil of France.

"Hello!" Big Joe called. "Captain Maitland . . ." There was no answer. "Where the hell is he? Captain Maitland! Come on, let's move up."

They broke into a slow run, trying to keep their footing, squinting through the rain. They came up to the dyke beyond which glimmered a pond. Big Joe called out again. "Captain Maitland! Anybody around?"

"Cartwright!" Babra yelled.

A thick voice answered. "*Die seben haben* . . ."

"Nazi bastards," Big Joe muttered. A machine gun fired a quick burst, then another. There was a scream of pain and terror. And a grenade burst. Then quiet again.

"The place is rotten with Krauts," Big Joe said.

"He was here," Babra said. "The captain was right here. Maybe he's been killed already."

"Captain Maitland!" Big Joe shouted, voice heavy and demanding. "It's Big Joe!"

A voice came out of the darkness, startlingly close. "Maitland's by the boat house."

"Who the hell is that?" Big Joe wanted to know.

"Cartwright," the voice said.

"Cartwright, you know this place is lousy with Krauts?"

"I know. There's dozens of them."

"Well, why in hell didn't you report it?"

"The battery pack's run dry. Radio won't work."

"You should've sent Cowboy."

"Cowboy's with Captain Maitland."

Big Joe swore. "What do you guys want to do, spend the rest of the war in a Kraut camp?"

"At least we'd be out of the rain."

Nobody laughed.

Big Joe stood up and shouted. "Captain Maitland!"

Maitland's voice sounded from afar. "I'm in here . . ."

"He's in there," Cartwright echoed.

Big Joe began to move ahead. "Let me tell you something, Barbara, that Maitland'll be the death of me yet."

"The name is *Babra* . . ."

Big Joe kept moving.

The boat house had once been the pride of all the river sailors of the area. Large enough to house a number of vessels, it owned its own drydock plus storage and repair facilities. But now it was only a shell of its former self, the ceiling broken into two places by shells and one wall almost entirely ripped away. Still, it offered some protection from the rain.

Big Joe led Babra inside, peering around. "Captain Maitland, you here? It's me, Big Joe."

"Come in, Sergeant," Maitland said. Somehow, even in the midst of war, the captain managed to retain the look of a sleek garrison soldier.

Big Joe followed the sound of Maitland's voice, stepping gingerly onto a waterlogged pontoon that almost sank beneath his weight. He climbed back onto

the wooden duckwalk. He spotted a familiar figure. "That you, Cowboy?"

"Hi, Big Joe."

Big Joe moved down toward the end of the planking that still passed for a pier. At the far end he saw the outline of a pencil slim racing yacht, a beautiful vessel even to his untutored eye. Captain Maitland stood in silent admiration of the fine-lined craft.

"Captain," Big Joe began. "There's something you should know."

"Just look at that, Sergeant," Maitland replied. "Isn't she a lovely lady?"

"It's a boat."

"An eight-meter racing yacht, Sergeant. They don't build them like that any more."

"Is that what you got me out here for," Big Joe snarled. "To show me a lousy boat?"

"Exactly, Sergeant. You see, we're pulling out of this sector, and I want to make certain that the engineers get this out of the water and back to base."

Big Joe became aware of the anger rising along his veins. He fought against it. "What about Nancy?"

Maitland admired the boat from another angle. "The Third Army's taking over, sergeant, and we're going into reserve. When they've taken Nancy, we'll go back into the line."

"Dammit, no!" Big Joe exploded. "They can't do this to me again! Every goddamned time!"

"Now, Sergeant," Maitland soothed.

"Ever since we got out of the damned water at Omaha beach this has been happening. Every time we come near a town like Nancy, Patton's men, those guys with the ties on, ride in on their fancy tanks and make the play. I got it up to here with them, Captain,"

Outside a shell screamed across the night and Mait-

land hurled himself onto the racing yacht, as if to protect it. The shell exploded in the distance and the officer climbed back to his feet. Cowboy looked at Big Joe and Big Joe looked at Cowboy.

"Captain," Big Joe said, keeping his voice reasonable. "It seems to me that you have the welfare of your men at heart."

"That's the way I am, Sergeant."

"Now here is a big town full of passionate women, vintage wine, good restaurants, feather beds in rooms with hot showers."

"That's right, Sergeant," Maitland said. He stroked the hull of the boat lovingly.

"Well, Captain, this outfit's been blistered with heat, jumped on, bombed on, mortared by Mulligan all the way from the Normandy Bridgehead. The men are tired and disgusted, they need a rest, some fun . . ."

Maitland smiled. "The General says we got to pull out—so we pull out."

"Captain, you just can't do this."

Maitland grew thoughtful, pulled at his chin. "Tell me, Sergeant, do you think I could get this hull into the hold of a B-17?"

"We're point section to the whole damn army," Big Joe said. "Nancy's our town."

Cowboy interrupted. "I can hear tanks, Captain, and they don't sound like ours."

Maitland and Big Joe went to the door of the boat house and listened. The noise of the tanks was ominous in the night and closing fast.

"I think you may be right, Cowboy," Maitland said.

"Captain," Big Joe went on. "I've got it all fixed. We've even got a guide, a guy to show us around to the best places, see. All we gotta do is get in there."

Maitland faced Big Joe. "There's an S.S. Panzer Division which says you can't get in there."

"Okay, so we'll need a bit of help."

"Yeah," Maitland said, "to shift this yacht."

Suddenly the night came alive with rifle fire, the heavier sputter of machine guns, the dull thud of tank cannon. They moved out of the doorway.

"I've changed my mind, Sergeant," Maitland said.

"That's terrific!"

"Let's get back to the crossroads. If it's too hot, you get the men to the other side of the canal. I'll rustle up the engineers and take care of this beauty myself."

"Dammit, Captain, *you're* supposed to be running this here outfit."

Maitland laughed pleasantly. "You do such a good job, sergeant, why should I get in your way." He turned away. "Cowboy, you come with me."

Cowboy followed him out, shoulders lifted high in a helpless shrug.

Big Joe looked after the disappearing officer with mounting fury and frustration. His powerful hands squeezed the submachine gun. His eyes darted about, came to rest on Babra.

"Get Cartwright and the others back to the bridge. I wanna see what's happening. Check with me later, Barbara . . ." He lurched into the wet.

"How many times I got to tell ya, my name is Babra!"

IV

All hell broke loose at the crossroads. The night was alive with the deadly sounds of attack and counterattack, the hoarse cries of fighting men and the frightened screams of those about to die. Soldiers dashed through the rain lugging machine guns. A half-track came rattling up and a dozen men began unloading ammunition boxes. On the railway track, a German scout car had collapsed like a weary beast, flanks scarred and riddled with bullet holes, three still bodies hanging over the sides. Corporal Job, a tin cup filled with hot coffee in hand, slogged through the mud and issued directions to the men carrying ammunition. Satisfied, he went back inside the barn.

Here men went about their affairs with concentrated energy, neither slow nor urgent, their pace dictated by an inner time-wheel set by experience and intuition. At the table, Kelly, feet up, cigarette dangling from his wide mouth, pistol resting comfortably on his belly, watched Dankhopf drink from the whiskey bottle. The German officer paused to catch his breath. Kelly gestured with the pistol.

"Have another drink, Colonel," he said mildly. "Have it now."

Dankhopf obeyed.

"There's no sign of Big Joe out there," Corporal Job announced. If anyone heard, they gave no answer. "I suppose everyone's too busy to go find him," Job ended gloomily. He went over to the command car and looked at Little Joe who fiddled with his radio.

"Mulligan," Little Joe said, enunciating carefully. "I want you to put your mortars down on Section zero five. Zero five, Mulligan, that's to the right of the railroad tracks . . . No, Mulligan, *not on the tracks*, Mulligan . . . *we're* on the tracks, Mulligan. Us, your friends and allies. Put them down on the right and then zero slowly in towards us. That's right, Mulligan."

He raised his head to listen. In the distance, a rhythmic pattern of mortar explosions. He returned to the radio.

"That's better, Mulligan. I can hear them and you're doing fine, Mulligan . . . No, I don't think I will go outside to watch, Mulligan, because outside I am likely to get my head blown off . . ."

"There's no sign of Big Joe," Job said. No one answered. "I said, there's no sign of Big Joe.

Mitchell was fondly polishing the rocket launchers on the half-track, his touch sure and gentle. "He's not deaf. Big Joe hears what's goin' on, he'll be back."

The door swung open and a soldier came in, soaked and breathing hard. He looked around for someone in charge. "The Mickey Finn is bogged down in the mud just short of the canal. Do we abandon it or do you give us a tow?"

Corporal Job swore. "You don't abandon none of my machinery, Ford. I'll come along and look." He started out, then paused, glanced back at Kelly watching Dankhopf drink. "Hey, Kelly, couldn't you leave the prisoner and go find Big Joe? This is getting slightly serious."

Kelly shrugged, eyes holding on the colonel. "Corporal, Big Joe told me I got to look after the colonel and that's what I'm doing."

Dankhopf lifted the whiskey bottle in an unsteady salute and staggered closer to Kelly. He slapped an

arm around the soldier's shoulder. "Kelly," Dankhoph said, his accent becoming thicker. "Kelly, he's my friend. He understands. You know, he was an officer himself—until he was court marshalled . . ."

Job scowled. "Yeah, yeah. We know all about that . . ." He went out into the wet and dangerous night.

Dankhopf leaned toward Kelly. "Tell me, my friend, why is it they don't seem to like you?"

Kelly shifted the pistol out of the German's reach. "You know the story, Colonel. Once an officer, always an officer. I can't tell you what it's like, having to fight the rest of the war as an enlisted man . . .

Dankhopf's face seemed to melt with understanding and pity. His soft eyes grew moist. "Ah, Kelly, you know, there but for the grace of God go I. Just one mistake, Kelly, and you know what they do with me? To the Russian front they send me, just one little mistake."

"I understand."

The colonel straightened up, took a long drink from the bottle. He began to sing in German. Kelly tried to harmonize without much success.

Across the room, Little Joe was back on the radio, a worried note creeping into his voice. "Look, it's all right you saying we got to hold the ground at all costs, Major, but we're a reconnaissance company. It's not our job to hold the ground. That's work for an infantry company. Our job is to go someplace and look at it and tell you what the situation is. And I can tell you what the situation is here, Major. It is lousy. I mean *lousy!* It's cold, it's wet and the place is crawling with Krauts, which is not such a good situation to be into, Major."

Corporal Job reappeared, searching the interior of the barn. "Mitchell!" he called.

Mitchell continued to polish his rockets. "Yeah?"

"There's three tanks coming up the road," Job said matter-of-factly. "I would like to suggest that you get activated."

Mitchell stood erect, a horrified expression spreading across his pale face. "You mean you want me to take these beautiful babies out into that . . . that *weather!*"

"There's three tanks, Mitchell, coming fast . . ."

Mitchell slammed down the rags he'd been using. "Look, I am not taking these launchers out into the rain. They'll get *rusty*."

Corporal Job sighed. "Mitchell, these are enemy tanks I'm talking about."

"Then why don't you get some Shermans up to deal with them. These babies are too beautiful to waste on Krauts."

"Mitchell, try and understand the circumstances. We are not in contact with the main force. We are surrounded by the enemy. Now, goddammit, get off your tail and get out there!"

"Okay, okay! I just wanted you to know what my feelings are. Come on, you guys! Off and on!"

Mitchell's men roused themselves and climbed aboard the half-track, mumbling their complaints as they situated themselves around the rocket launchers. Mitchell got behind the wheel and started the motor. As if in protest, he backed the vehicle up in a quick burst, tearing down a section of the near wall, disappearing through it.

"You could at least use the door!" Job shouted after him.

From his place at the radio, Little Joe called out. "Say, listen, Corporal Job, don't you think we ought to get out of here? It's becoming unhealthy."

Job's face grew sad and long. "Let's wait and see what Big Joe says."

"If he gets here . . ."

"He'll get here," Job said, without conviction.

"Sure," Little Joe said.

A sudden pattern of shells burst closer this time, rocking the barn, the yellow light flickering weirdly. Little Joe waited for the barn to steady itself, for the lights to hold, then slid behind the wheel of the jeep. He started the motor.

"Corporal Job," he said in a mild, vaguely apologetic manner. "I like Big Joe as much as anybody, but I don't want to spend the rest of the war in a Kraut camp. Also, since I am first generation Italian, it occurs to me that maybe I can be shot as a traitor or something, Italy and Germany being allies. Also, there are very strong indications that the Germans are coming here and that we are not going to stop them. So with your permission, I am withdrawing this command vehicle to the other side of the canal."

Job nodded sadly. "Permission granted."

Little Joe began to maneuver the jeep out of the barn. Abruptly he stopped. "Hey, Kelly," he called out. "We're going, Kelly."

Kelly waved idly in reply. Colonel Dankhopf began to sing louder.

"Hey, Kelly," Little Joe began again. Before he could go on, Mitchell appeared, drenched and unhappy. "Corporal Job," he said, his manner pedagogical. "I don't know if you can count, but there's not three tanks out there. There's about thirty."

Job accepted the information without sign of panic. "Okay. Pass the word along. Try and hold as long as you can, then withdraw to the other side of the canal. Pass the word."

"Okay," Mitchell said. "Just as long as you know that it's a waste of my time scoring three tanks when there are thirty."

"That's okay, Mitchell," Job said. "I understand. You did good."

Mitchell did a crisp about-face and left. Job looked around the barn. "Okay, you guys, outside. There's a whole bunch of Kraut armor coming this way and this place ain't safe no more."

"But, Corporal, it's raining like hell out there . . ."

"Where we supposed to go now?"

"Somebody ought to report these conditions to the Inspector General . . ."

Job waited until they had all left, then climbed into Little Joe's jeep. Little Joe gestured across the barn to where Kelly and Dankhopf were still sharing the bottle of whiskey, still singing, their voices softer now, more intimate.

"Hey, Kelly . . ."

Kelly reached down and came up with a submachine gun. He brandished it threateningly. "Get the hell out of here!"

Little Joe gunned the jeep into motion, wheeled out into the night, aware that the sounds of the German tanks were much nearer now. Much too near. He drove faster.

Except for Kelly and Dankhopf, the barn was empty. The colonel sang softly, his manner sentimental as the words of a German lieder issued from his chubby mouth. When he finished, Kelly applauded appreciatively, the clapping barely audible over the intrusive sounds of warfare. Dankhopf inclined his head gratefully.

"You are my friend, Kelly," he said, sniffling sentimentally.

Kelly reached for the two metal bars, hefted them

and spoke slowly, with a certain reverence. "Dankhopf," he said quietly. "These are gold bars."

"Yes," Dankhopf sniffed. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"They sure are."

Dankhopf teetered forward, made a fluttery gesture toward the twin bars. "Kelly, I want to give you one in appreciation of the courtesy you have shown me since I was captured. But for you, I am sure that big sergeant would have had me shot."

Kelly jerked his head in agreement. "Colonel, you are quite right and I much appreciate the gesture." He indicated the bottle and Dankhopf helped himself to another drink.

"Kelly," Dankhopf said, tongue working the last drops off his lips. "Kelly, you know it was my mission to ship all the Abwerht gold in Europe out of our Paris headquarters and back to the Fatherland."

"And that's what's in your convoy?"

"Yes, Kelly," Dankhopf said thickly. "Unfortunately it is. My poor convoy, stuck in that little town guarded by my faithful men who still await my return with the spare parts for their precious motors."

Kelly's eyes flickered. "And where is this town?"

"Oh, Kelly, you would like it! A charming little place about 35 kilometres on the other side of Nancy. It has a most *beautiful* fourteenth century church tower and—"

The appearance of a German foot soldier interrupted the exchange. The soldier took two or three steps into the barn, rifle at the ready, trying to accustom himself to the light. He spotted Colonel Dankhopf first and brought himself up to attention. As he did, Kelly swung the submachine gun around and pulled down on the trigger, letting go a three-second burst. The soldier took four slugs in the chest, went over backwards, twitched once and lay still. Kelly

stood up, the barrel of the gun aimed in Dankhopf's direction. Kelly's eyes were clear now and hard.

"How much gold is there?" he said thinly.

Dankhopf, very drunk, polite, and not quite sure what was happening around him, replied precisely. "There are over four thousand bars, Kelly. All identical to these two." He raised his arm to shoulder height. "Stacked this high. Higher. All in the bank at Claremont."

Kelly's brain worked swiftly. "You said they were in the convoy."

Dankhopf shrugged, grinned crookedly. "I had to take them out of the trucks, my friend, while they are being repaired. So they are in the bank." He leaned forward. "You must believe me, Kelly. I speak only the truth. Listen, my friend, my good friend, let us make a deal, yes. The war, it is nearly over. A man must think of the future. Let us go to Claremont together, you and I. We can take the gold to Switzerland. The Swiss understand about such things. There is enough to make both of us rich men." Dankhopf straightened up. "So, Kelly, what do you say?"

Kelly, the machine gun in one hand, a gold bar in the other, said nothing.

V

Through the rain and the haze of battle, the bridge could barely be seen. Little Joe had parked the command jeep out of the traffic lanes, just in case, and kept the motor running. He was pleased when Big Joe came running up out of the mist, that pudding face set and determined.

"Is everyone across?" Big Joe wanted to know.

"Yes. Where's Maitland?" Little Joe said.

"Trying to salvage a yacht."

"Very funny."

"A fact, that's all."

"He's trying to salvage a yacht," Big Joe said again. "Have you been onto Headquarters?"

"Yeah." Little Joe shook his head. It was a strange war, being fought by a bunch of strange characters. A man had to be careful around people like these, or he'd get into trouble. "Headquarters says we got to hold." He eyed Big Joe curiously.

"Let them go and sing hymns. The Third took over this section as of one hour ago. We are pulling out."

Little Joe revved the jeep motor and laughed. "I'm ready. I'll meet you back about ten miles."

"Hey, wait just one minute. Where's Kelly?"

"Still in the barn, with that Kraut colonel. The two of them are having one hell of a party . . ."

Big Joe scowled, mouth twisting up, flesh folding over, eyes withdrawing into their sockets. Little Joe didn't like to see Big Joe get angry. Not at anybody.

"You tell Mulligan to give me three minutes," Big

Joe bit off, "then he is to zero in his mortars right on top of that barn."

Little Joe reached for the radio phone. "If you say so, Sergeant."

Big Joe broke into a gallop, charging through the thickening smoke. Hunched over, carrying his submachine gun low, he pounded across the bridge. There were voices off to the left as he hit the road, but he couldn't see any movement. Through the wet, gray night, he was able to make out only the dull glow of burning vehicles.

Outside the barn, he slowed down, eased close to one wall, sliding around to the door. It was open. Machine gun ready, he stepped inside. In the middle of the floor Kelly was trying to support the drunken, sagging Colonel Dankhopf. The colonel seemed to be singing, though the words were unintelligible.

"Come on, Colonel," Kelly was saying, "I am going to take you for a walk."

"Kelly!" Big Joe roared.

The tall soldier glanced up, his expression tranquil, a pleasant smile on his mouth.

"Hello, Big Joe."

"Kelly," Big Joe said, almost pleading. "There's half the German army coming up the road. That daft Irishman is about to put four tons of mulligatawny right on top of this building. What are you doing here?"

"Looking after the colonel."

Big Joe raised the machine gun to his hip. "Let's shoot the bastard and get out."

Colonel Dankhopf began to sing louder, a beer-drinking song from his university days. He sang with great enthusiasm, though slightly off-key. Kelly pushed the drunken officer behind him, shielding him from Big Joe's weapon with his own body.

"Shooting him's not such a good idea, Big Joe. Shoot him and we don't get the gold."

Big Joe lowered the muzzle of his weapon. "Gold?" he said. "What gold is that, Kelly?"

Still keeping himself between Big Joe and the colonel, Kelly extended one of the gold bars for the other man to see. "Look at *this!* Colonel Dankhopf was generous enough to give this to me. It's gold, solid gold."

Big Joe shrugged. "Okay, buddy, so you made a buck or two. Big deal."

Kelly straightened up, mustering all the dignity possible with the colonel hanging onto him. "There are 4,000 of these little babies, and the colonel has them all."

Big Joe wet his mouth. "Where?"

"In a bank 25 miles east of Nancy."

Before Big Joe could answer, the night was split by the ominous whistle of incoming mortar shells. Big Joe turned crimson, thrust his arms to the sky.

"Mulligan!" he screamed. "I said *three* minutes!"

It seemed to Kelly that someone picked up the barn and moved it. But that was impossible. Still, he was no longer where he had been, that much was certain. More than that, people, or things, pounded fiercely at his body and he wanted to fight back but lacked the capability and the will. He decided that he had drunk too much of that whiskey. That was it! He was tanked and hallucinating badly. Then he remembered the terrible sound of the incoming stuff, that monstrous explosion, and he understood everything. He, Colonel Dankhopf and Big Joe had been blown to pieces by their own people, destroyed. Wiped out. Killed. His big chance to be rich, truly rich, was wasted, gone for all time. He sighed sadly and closed

his eyes, gave himself over to the encroaching darkness. There was nothing left to do but die. . . .

Across the canal, on the approach to the bridge, Corporal Job, Ford and Gutkowski watched the barn come apart in horror. They were unable to move as through the haze and the smoke the debris settled and the barn seemed to collapse like a house of cards.

"Kelly," Job muttered. "Kelly's in there."

"Oh, Holy Mother of God," Gutkowski said and made the Sign of the Cross. "Big Joe is dead. I never believed for a minute he could be killed and now he's dead."

"Shut up!" Job said tonelessly.

"Maybe he ain't dead," Ford suggested. "Maybe one of them's still okay."

"You think there's a chance?" Gutkowski said.

"We'll never find out standing around," Ford replied.

"Well, let's GO!" Job bellowed. "Let's go!"

They charged across the bridge, hit the other side and kept running toward the wreckage of what once had been their very nice headquarters . . .

Mitchell saw it all from alongside his half-track. He stood silent and sullen, joints locked, unable to react in body or mind. His brain assimilated all the facts, the mortaring of the barn, the direct hit, the collapse of the structure with Kelly and Big Joe inside; it was all there transformed into electric impulses of memory to be recalled and utilized as needed; but at this moment, it meant nothing. He rejected the information.

Until he saw Job and the other cross the bridge. A silent scream expired in his throat, dribbled out of him as a mournful sigh of regret. He vaulted back into the half-track.

"C'mon," he yelled at his men. "C'mon, let's move out! Move out!"

"Where we gonna go?" one of the soldiers asked logically.

Mitchell raised his fist as if to strike the man, then let it drop. "Maybe we can help," he said softly.

The man nodded and the half-track rolled forward through the mist. They clattered across the bridge and up the incline, roughly parallel to the railroad track.

"That place's a mess," the driver said solemnly.

"Ain't nobody comin' out of there!" one of the others added.

"Big Joe finally caught one . . ."

"Look!" the man beside the driver said in awe. "Look there!"

All eyes swung in the direction he was pointing, peering across the lumpy landscape to the railway and beyond. Looming out of the smoke was the black ugly snout of a Mark IV tank, a Maltese cross painted onto its thickly armored chest.

"Tank!" Mitchell shouted. "German tank!"

He swung into action, leaping to firing position alongside the gleaming rockets. The men responded as one and the launchers were brought to bear.

"Ready! Fire!"

The half-track leaped back with the recoil and the night was sundered by the sibilant backwash of the rockets. The Mark IV took the twin blow head-on, shuddered, and began to smoke. The men in the half-track cheered.

The barn had rearranged itself. Like a children's game of pick-up sticks, it had been thrown aloft by some giant hand, then put back down in exaggerated confusion and sound. Planks and beams, sidings and troughs, posts and studs, went flying; split, shattered, splintered, bent, they bounced off each other and danced uncertainly to rest. The clatter ceased at last

and a dust cloud rose up, too thick for the rain to disperse.

"Jesus, what a mess!" The voice came out of the wreckage, charged with displeasure bút tempered by a resignation that said its owner was accustomed to errors of judgment and execution. "That goddamned Mulligan . . ."

Big Joe shifted and rolled, lifted and shoved, began to clear strands of the shattered roof off his powerful body. Like a great blue whale surfacing for air, his head and shoulders came thrusting clear. He passed a hand across his bald pate and finding it unscathed almost smiled.

Corporal Job, Ford, and Gutkowski came clambering over the remains of the building, calling out, hoping to find survivors.

"Big Joe," Job yelled. "Big Joe, Big Joe, Big Joe . . ."

"Oh, shut up," Big Joe grunted.

"Big Joe," Job said, spotting him. "You're all right!"

"Sure I'm all right. Whataya expect! Where's Kelly?"

"Kelly," Job yelled. "Kelly, Kelly, Kelly . . ."

"There he is!" Gutkowski crowed.

They saw him on hands and knees crawling out from under a thick cross-beam that had helped form a protective ceiling above him. But a flying chunk of wood had bounced off his forehead and he was bleeding. They helped him to his feet. He shook his head and looked around. He squinted toward a blurred figure.

"Is that you, Big Joe?"

"Yeah. You alright, Kelly?"

"Yeah. Where's Dankhopf?"

"Yeah," Big Joe said. "Where's the Kraut?"

As if in answer, the voice of Dankhopf was heard in

the night, gay and more than slightly alcoholic, as if its owner was dancing through the rain and the battlesmoke.

"Dankhopf!" Kelly cried, thinking of the gold.

"Dankhopf!" Big Joe shouted, not wanting to lose an important prisoner.

"Dankhopf is singing," Job observed.

"What the hell is there to sing about?" Big Joe wanted to know.

"Well, he ain't been killed, for one thing," Gutkowski said logically.

"Gutkowski," Big Joe said.

"What?"

"Shut up!"

"Sure, Sergeant."

"Dankhopf!" Kelly croaked. "I see him!" Tripping and crawling, slipping and sliding, Kelly went after the German officer.

"Kelly come back!" Big Joe commanded.

Kelly faded into the darkness.

Job took Big Joe by the arm. "Come on, Big Joe, we'll help you out of here. Maybe get you to an aid station."

"That's a terrific idea," Ford said, taking Big Joe's other arm.

Big Joe twisted free of the two men. "Let go of me!"

"Are you okay, Big Joe?" Ford asked anxiously.

"Get after Kelly, you guys. He's gone nuts!"

Job looked around. "He's gone . . ."

"Of course he's gone, you dummy. That's why I want you to find him, before he gets himself shot up. Now get the hell after him!"

Out of the gloom, Kelly's voice drifted back to them, a shifting beacon of sound. "Dankhopf, Dankhopf, come back Dankhopf . . ."

Dankhopf paused in his unsteady flight to listen to Kelly's voice. A drunken laugh sputtered out of him and the eyes widened in that gelatinous face. "Kelly, Kelly, you must find me . . ." He began to run again, laughing as he went, pleased with this new game.

"Dankhopf," Kelly kept calling. "Dankhopf." He stumbled through the darkness, driven by a rising desperation, a need to find the colonel, to do this thing right. He thought only of Dankhopf and that the German was drunk, unable to take care of himself, and gave no consideration to his own welfare. "Dankhopf!"

Dankhopf spun down a short incline with the imagined grace of a dancer at the Paris ballet. He did an awkward leap and another, a pirouette, and even tried an entrechat; he lumbered happily along, arms spread wide, the precious attaché case hanging loosely from his left hand.

Behind, the voice of Kelly, called out, concerned, searching. And Dankhopf answered.

"Find me, Kelly. Find me."

Dankhopf whirled along. He bounced off a tree and cried out at the sudden blow. From close by he heard people murmuring. He pressed himself against the bole of a great tree and as the voices came closer, he shifted around to keep the tree between himself and his pursuers. He did not see that the three men who passed within six feet of him were privates of a German armored infantry company. Dankhopf went on.

Everywhere there was noise, the sounds of war returned. Explosions that signified Mulligan and his mortars were busy at work; and the sharp crack of rifle fire, and bursts of machine guns. A grenade went off and then another; the machine gun was silent.

Dankhopf found himself in a pine woods. Here the smoke was heavy, clinging to the branches, and Dan-

khopf began to cough. All this playing, he told himself; he was unused to so much exercise. He was not, after all, a combat soldier. As if to reinforce that fact, bullets winged through the night sending chips of bark and branch flying. Dankhopf hurried to find a safer place.

He broke out into the open, the barely visible terrain vaguely familiar to him. Without thinking, he crossed a fence and found himself in an untended corn field. It seemed to Dankhopf like a very nice place to be.

He didn't hear the machine gun fire until after the slugs had ripped into his body. He fell heavily, the pain quite bad, choking now on his own blood. He rolled onto his back and gazed up into the shifting smoke, wishing he could see the stars. Soon a face loomed over him. He blinked and made an effort to focus.

"Ah, Kelly," he gasped. "You found me."

"You shouldn't have run . . ."

"I gave you a . . . good chase, yes . . ."

"Yes, Dankhopf. A good chase."

The pain grew sharper and Dankhopf coughed. His eyes began to close. "Kelly," he said, "is it not too bad, the stars went out." And then, too drunk to know what he was doing, Dankhopf died.

VI

The next morning the sun hung low in a dry sky. Below it, a succession of gentle hills rich with ripening vineyards. In the shallow valleys and gulleys smoke of the previous night's battle still lingered, a reluctant reminder of the violence and death, a forerunner of what lay ahead. Fighter planes sped across the empty sky on lonely, impersonal hunts, filling in the hours between more organized missions, earning flight pay.

On the narrow black strip of road wending its way across France toward Germany, the brutish power of General George Patton's army surged ahead. Tanks and half-tracks, trucks and jeeps, all clanging with the housekeeping details of war and swarming with red-eyed infantrymen for whom a ride on the back of a tank was a luxury to be treasured. The hysterical shriek of diesel engines sliced through the morning quiet and the heavy treaded vehicles grated on the already hot asphalt.

On the grassy bank above the road, above the ditch, above the wide shoulder where their own scarred and dirty vehicles were parked, the men of Captain Maitland's company slept or dipped queasily into their breakfast cans of meat and beans, or beans without meat, or sat and smoked and watched the passing face of war.

Little Joe scratched his unshaven cheeks and spoke in a disconsolate voice. "The guys with the ties!"

"They *all* got ties on," Gutkowski said in wonder.

"It's that Patton. He goes for flash."

Along the road, paying no attention to the steady stream of armor flowing past, shuffled a single soldier, dirty and weary, carrying a black attaché case in one hand.

"Hey," said Little Joe. "There's Kelly!"

"I thought he was dead," Job said tonelessly.

"No," Gutkowski said. "He's not dead."

They watched Kelly move past them to where Big Joe sat in his jeep, making out his morning report. He looked up as Kelly approached, made an entry.

"I was just putting you down as missing," Big Joe said. "You look hungover to me."

Kelly stared at the bald man.

"Did you find Dankhopf?"

"Yeah. Dead."

He pulled himself into the jeep alongside Big Joe, patted the sargeant's pockets, searching for something. He pulled a crumpled pack of Camels out of Big Joe's field jacket, put one in his mouth and lit it. He dragged deeply, with relief.

In silence, Big Joe and Kelly watched a tank battalion rumble past. The Shermans were sleek and clean, as if never used, and the men riding their armored backs looked the same. They yelled insults at the members of the reconnaissance company on the hillside.

"Those guys," Big Joe said, without emphasis. "Those guys'll be in Nancy tonight. They'll be making it with our women, lying in our bathtubs, sleeping in our beds. Nancy. It was in our hand like a ripe fruit. It even had a dame's name. *Nancy*."

Kelly shifted the black attache case into his lap. He placed one hand flat upon it, a gesture of possession or affection, or a little of both.

"I'm going for that gold, Joe."

Big Joe kept his face averted. He searched through

his pockets for a cigarette, couldn't find one. Kelly handed him the pack. He lit up and blew smoke.

"I got news for you," he said quietly. "*You* are going back to the States."

"Is that your idea?" Kelly said quickly, toughly.

Big Joe sucked on the cigarette, as if in contemplation. "Kelly," he said at last, "I got a job. To get these guys to Berlin without being killed. It's not easy. We're at the front end of a war all the way. You don't fit in. You're a loner, Kelly. Like yesterday. Like last night. You're the best fighting man I ever come across, but I'll be glad to see you gone." The big face swung around, the deep-set eyes cold and steady. Satisfied he had made his point, Big Joe looked back to the front.

Kelly exhaled softly. "Sometimes, Joe, you remind me of my mother."

Big Joe grunted. "Pick up your gear and get the hell out of here."

In daylight, the headquarters barn could be clearly viewed for the wreck it had become. That anyone had survived the mortar attack defied all the logic of warfare. The men all agreed: Kelly, Big Joe, and the German colonel, should have died in there. Of course, Dankhopf had gotten it later, but that wasn't the same thing.

Below the barn, toward the canal, a tank transporter had moved into place and Captain Maitland was supervising the crating and loading of the racing yacht onto its flat bed.

"Careful there, you men, this is a first priority project. You don't find beauties like this everywhere. . ."

The captain never took his eyes off the yacht as Big Joe's jeep rolled into the farmyard and stopped. Big

Joe assessed the scene with displeasure, spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Kelly in the seat alongside.

"The captain should've joined the Navy."

"The captain . . ." Kelly began, breaking off.

Big Joe climbed out of the jeep and marched over to Maitland, threw an easy salute. Maitland acknowledged it without turning. Kelly, watching, smiled tightly.

"Captain Maitland," Big Joe began.

"Hi, Sergeant. Do you think I can get this to Paris by Sunday?"

Big Joe's face turned crimson and his eyes narrowed. "Did you bring me to this lousy farmhouse to talk about this lousy boat again?"

"No, sergeant," Maitland said mildly. "You see, I've done a deal with Headquarters. You'll be happy to learn that I've got seven days rest for you and the men. You see that they have a good time while I take the yacht to Paris and do one or two little errands for the General."

"And where do we take this beautiful vacation?" Big Joe asked with deceptive softness.

"Here," Maitland said cheerfully. "Right here, Big Joe."

Big Joe's face underwent a series of swift changes. From pink to blood red to a death's-head pale, the lips twisting, the cheeks quivering, the eyes turning into bright globules of granite. His hands clenched and unclenched, clenched again, great swollen lumps of bone and knuckle.

"This dump?" he gritted out.

As if sensing something profound was happening that would affect their well-being, the men of the company began to gather round, to inch forward, to listen with intense concern.

Maitland smiled graciously at them, pleased that he

was able to reward them with this lovely little holiday from the trials and pains of everyday living.

"Yes," he said comfortably, "with a little bit of imagination you can fix the area up real good. Lay out a baseball diamond, men, run water in from the well up on the mountain. You'll be able to have cold showers which are quite good for you. And the chaplain will be along with some paperback books and home movies."

Big Joe seemed to swell up like a blowfish under attack. "But we're thirty miles from the nearest town. There's . . . no . . . *action.*"

"Exactly," Maitland said. He glanced around; the yacht had been loaded and secured into place. Hurriedly, he climbed into the transporter's cabin next to the driver as the men of his company shuffled forward, faces tight and glowering. "Start the engine," Maitland said.

"You can't do this to us!" Big Joe shouted.

"This crummy place . . ."

". . . Stinks!"

"We'll go to Paris, you take cold showers!"

Maitland leaned out the side window, shouting. "The terrific thing about this location is its quiet. Get yourselves a suntan, men, and a good rest. In seven days time, you'll all be feeling first rate, ready to get back in the fight."

The tank transporter began to inch ahead.

Big Joe kept pace alongside. "There's no booze. There's no dames. There's no *action!*"

"That reminds me," Maitland called out. "Don't meddle with the women around here, their husbands carry guns. And don't forget that this is still a war zone, the penalty for looting is death."

Howling with frustration and hate, the men leaped up and down, waving their fists, gesturing with their

weapons, as the tank transporter, the yacht lurching on top of it, disappeared onto the road and around a hill.

"The penalty for looting is death," one of the men cackled.

"Get yourselves a suntan and a good rest, he says."

"The great thing about this location is its quiet."

The sound of the jeep engine brought Big Joe around in time to see Kelly wheeling out of the farmyard. The lean soldier was laughing and he waved a hand in Big Joe's direction.

"Kelly!" Big Joe screamed, "come back here with that vehicle!"

Kelly ignored the summons and disappeared in the direction of the supply depot. As if to take his place, the chaplain came into sight, swinging jauntily down the road, a bright and cheerful man with pink cheeks and a sweet mouth, his arms full of paperback books and party games. Big Joe turned away, swearing and moaning at the same time.

"This lousy war . . ."

VII

The supply depot was situated away from the highway, a quiet place set back among the low hills. Kelly parked the jeep next to a row of camouflaged gasoline trucks and got out. He moved past the trucks into a maze of gasoline drums, stacked up and forming narrow avenues. He marched down one tin boulevard, and then another, until he came to a quartet of Sherman tanks parked in tall grass. A concrete bunker nearby still bore direction signs in German. Kelly ducked into the bunker.

It was a scene out of Dickens, the interior dark and gloomy, with the suggestion of dust and cobwebs, a sense of something illegal or immoral or both going on. Scattered around the bunker were some fat and dirty men laboring like neglected gnomes over stacks of official papers. None of them gave Kelly any notice. He looked around and located a man dirtier than all the rest, uglier, and reeking of corruption; a man who hunched over a table with a kind of avaricious compulsion. Kelly went forward past a wall of steel boxes, their half open drawers stuffed with files.

"Crapgame," Kelly said.

Without looking up, Crapgame reached out, hand locating his false teeth which lay like a paperweight on a pile of documents. He brought the teeth up to his mouth and snapped them into place. Only then did he raise his head, measuring Kelly with suspicion.

"Whataya want?"

"I want to talk to you. With none of these guys around."

Crapgame's minions paused in their work with neither resentment nor regret; they were used to being unwanted. Crapgame made a gesture of dismissal and they rose and went away, chattering among themselves. Crapgame returned to his paperwork.

"Okay, Kelly. We're alone."

Kelly decided to be very cool. He located Big Joe's cigarettes in his pocket and lit one, puffed slowly. After a while, Crapgame raised his eyes. "I hear Maitland's got himself a yacht. Taken it to Paris."

"That's right."

"There's no money in yachts," Crapgame said, lowering his head. "What does he want a yacht for?"

Kelly shrugged. "It doesn't matter. The yacht gets him out of the way for a few days."

Crapgame straightened up, his face expressionless. But his bleary eyes were shrewd and calculating. He put his hands flat on the table.

"What do you want, Kelly?"

Kelly measured the little man. When he spoke it was very slowly, enunciating each point as he went along. "I want enough oil, gasoline, ammunition and stores to keep a section in the field for three days. I also want the codewords, callsigns, and the passwords for tonight's attack. And I want signed movement orders good enough to fool a movement marshall under flashlight. And I want them all within six hours."

Crapgame made no response, but Kelly knew that the supply sergeant was considering the request. "What's in it for me?" Crapgame said finally.

Kelly grinned. "A piece of cake when we get it."

"Cake! What kind of cake? Kunzel?"

Kelly reached into the black attaché case and came up with one of the gold bars. He dropped it onto Crapgame's papers. The seamy little man stared at it for a beat or two, before taking it in hand. He exam-

ined it swiftly, expertly. Satisfied, he put the bar down and picked up the telephone, cranked it.

"Get me a quotation for gold on the Paris market," he said into the instrument, voice crisp and business-like. "Yeah, right now." He dropped the receiver back in its cradle, leaned back, eyeing Kelly. "How much more, where this came from?"

"Four thousand bars."

Crapgame allowed himself no reaction. "Where is all this gold?"

"In a bank."

"You're getting ambitious, aren't you? How do you expect to blow a bank and get away with it?"

"The bank is behind enemy lines."

Crapgame appreciated that and a blissful expression took over his bloated face. "That," he said with quiet respect, "could be the perfect crime."

The telephone rang and he picked it up. "Yeah." He made some notes. "Yeah." He pulled a small adding machine forward and began punching at the keys. "Okay. Right. Okay. Right. I got it." He put the phone down and kept at the machine. He checked his figures. "I make it to be one point six million dollars . . . . !"

An almost reverent stillness filled the bunker. Crapgame looked at Kelly and Kelly looked at Crapgame, neither willing to say anything. A polite cough from out of the darkness behind the metal file cabinets shattered the interlude.

"You fellows think you could use some help?" a voice said.

A hostile tension drew down the corners of Kelly's mouth. His hand dropped to his holstered pistol. "Who the hell is that?" He walked stiffly over to the files, peered into the gloom. The flame of a cigarette lighter provided an answer. A tall thin man with long

yellow hair sat on the edge of a double-decker bunk. He was naked to the waist and around his neck dangled an Iron Cross. His long legs were covered by the breeches of a German general and he wore a Luger on his hip, carried low, cowboy style.

"That's Oddball," Crapgame said, coming up behind Kelly. "I forgot about him."

The lighter flame flickered, then grew brighter. Behind Oddball on the bunk, Kelly made out a girl, a girl who appeared to be naked and lovely in every voluptuous detail.

"That's a girl!" he said.

"Yeah," Crapgame agreed. "You remember."

Kelly looked again at the girl and then thought some more about the gold. He grew angry once more. "You said we were alone," he accused Crapgame.

"Oddball's okay."

Oddball came forward, a crazy, deceptive smile on his mouth. He slipped his wiry arms into a leather jerkin. Kelly noticed that his eyes, despite the smile, were hard and shiny.

"I got four Shermans out there," Oddball said.

"What's your outfit?"

"Right now we ain't got none."

"Where's your officer."

The smile seemed to widen. "He got decapitated by an eighty-eight about six weeks back. Don't say you're sorry—the sonuvabitch's been trying to get us all killed every since we landed at Omaha Beach."

Crapgame inched forward. "Oddball hasn't reported the officer dead yet because I'm collecting his whiskey."

Kelly measured Oddball coldly. He was chewing gum, shifting from one foot to another. He looked slightly effeminate, but dangerous. As if aware he was being assessed, Oddball took the gum out of his mouth.

"We see our role as being of a defensive nature," he said reflectively. "While our armies are advancing so fast and everybody's hellbent on becoming a hero, why we feel we should hold ourselves in reserve. Then when the Krauts mount a counter-attack, which maybe threatens Paris or New York, why, we'll move and stop them. But for one point six million dollars, we might be willing to go over to the attack for a few days. I'd be glad to help you out. Y'know, a Sherman can be useful sometimes."

Kelly considered Oddball without enthusiasm. Oddball held the glance for as long as he could, then looked away. He indicated the exit. For the first time, Kelly became aware of music playing somewhere outside. He started for the doorway, looked back. The girl had come around in front of the files. She *was* naked and perfect. Kelly wet his mouth.

"You like that?" Oddball said hopefully.

"Just thinking back," Kelly said.

"And?" Crapgame said.

"And I remembered," Kelly answered, heading for the stairs. "Every last detail."

Outside, in the glare of the sun, Kelly allowed a moment or two for his eyes to adjust. Then he saw the dancers, three men stripped to the waist, dancing Greek-style. Like Oddball, Iron Crosses dangled from around their necks. They moved in an ever-narrowing circle around a young girl who sat cross-legged on the ground, a euphoric expression on her lovely young face. In her hand she held a bayonet and there was a steel helmet on her head. Otherwise, she was naked.

Beyond the dancers, were the rest of Oddball's crew. In various stages of dress and undress, the men lay with naked girls on the grass eating grapes and drinking some of the local wine from a barrel, which was perched strategically on one of the Sherman

tanks. The girls, Kelly noticed with interest, were very young, very pretty, very healthy.

A few men were busy dismantling the gleaming high-explosive shells used by the Sherman's guns with absolute unconcern for the danger involved. Kelly watched one man as he emptied one of the capsules, then filled it with a quantity of very bright paint.

Kelly looked back at Oddball. He shrugged, mouth turned in that deceptive smile. "These are the boys," he murmured.

"And those are the tanks," Kelly added, his disapproval evident.

Oddball's eyes flickered to the crusted, scabrous lumps of armor that seemed too dirty and rusted to move. "Yeah." He nodded wisely. "You are noting the dirt and the rust? We like to give the impression that we just come out of action and are in need of a period of rest and reorganization. That way nobody bothers us."

Oddball moved forward, past the naked girls and their friends, leaped onto the first tank and struggled to open the two rusted hatch covers. At last he succeeded and a flash of sunlight glittered off the gleaming chrome and silvered surfaces of the engines. Kelly wanted to see for himself. Thirty cylinders of the five Chrysler motors sat pristinely on their beds, polished and modified as if they were on display in the showroom of a dealer.

"I'm impressed," Kelly said.

"Notice, please," Oddball said, "that the machinery is in good working order. It has in fact been improved on by our mechanical genius, here—Moriarty."

A man with the muffin face and the loose gait of a punchdrunk fighter joined them, grinning, head bobbing loosely. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, yeah."

"These tanks can go faster backwards than any

other tank in the European Theatre of operations." Oddball paused, waiting for that information to sink in. When Kelly showed no appreciation, he went on. "We like to feel we can get out of trouble quicker than we get in."

"Any other secret weapons?" Kelly wanted to know.

Oddball chewed rapidly on his gum. "Yeah. See, we are always coming up against tanks bigger and better than ours are. All we can do is hope to scare them away. Like you take this gun." He indicated the huge, oversized cannon jutting out of the Sherman. "Well, that is an ordinary seventy-five millimeter but we added four extra feet to the barrel so the Krauts, if they spot us, will think maybe it's a ninety millimeter job." He picked up one of the shells his men had been working on and laughed, a mirthless, flat sound. "Then we got our own ammunition. This stuff's got paint inside it. And when we fire it, it makes pretty pictures. It sure scares the he llout of the Nazis." He laughed again and indicated a cluster of loudspeakers mounted on another tank. "See those big loudhailers. Well, when we go into battle we play music, very loud. It kind of calms us down."

Kelly's eyes raked the scene: the cruddy-looking tanks, the naked girls, the men in their wild costumes, with their wilder ideas.

"These guys," he said slowly. "They look as if they'd run at the first sight of trouble."

Oddball's brows rose in astonishment. "Well, *sure* they would. That's why they're alive now."

Kelly looked at each man in turn, then studied a 16-year-old girl doing a wild dance. "Some dance!" he commented.

"Yeah," Oddball said, not really caring. "Well, are we in?"

"I'll let you know." Kelly turned abruptly and strode back toward the bunker.

Oddball called defiantly after him. "Don't call us, we'll call you, is that the idea?"

Kelly made no reply, ducking into the bunker. Oddball jumped off the tank and went after him. Neither his crew nor the naked girls noticed his absence; they had barely recognized his presence.

Inside the bunker, Crapgame was back at his worktable and his miniature adding machine. Kelly confronted him.

"Well, Crapgame, what's it gonna be?"

Crapgame wore a sheepish expression. "Kelly, I made a slight mistake with a zero. It's not one point six millon dollars. It's *sixteen* million dollars."

Kelly showed nothing on his face.

Looking past him, Crapgame saw Oddball enter the bunker, take up a position along the wall.

"Man," Crapgame sighed. "That is a lot of money."

"Do I get the supplies?" Kelly said.

Crapgame stood up. He struggled into a leather jerkin. "Kelly, I tell you what. I'm going to do more than give you the supplies. I'm going to come along with you." He snatched a steel helmet off the wall and deposited it on his uncombed head, picked up a rusting carbine. "After all, I got an investment to protect . . ."

They started for the door, when Kelly spotted Oddball. He hesitated, frowning.

"What about me?" Oddball said.

"What about him?" Crapgame said.

"Me and my guys, my Shermans?" Oddball said.

Kelly went back to Crapgame's table. He unslung his map case and opened it, indicated a spot on the map. "I want you to be here tomorrow night at 2100 hours," he snapped out. "Can you make it?"

Oddball looked at the map. He checked points of reference. "I've got to figure a way to get four Shermans through the lines . . . ?"

"That's the problem," Kelly said. "*Your* problem."

"2100. We'll be there," Oddball said.

Kelly went back to the door. "If you're late, we go without you."

Oddball jerked his head once, the crazy smile back in place. "If we're late it'll be because we're dead."

Kelly left, Crapgame at his shoulder. Outside, Crapgame hung a worn notice near the doorway. It read:

Business Will Be Resumed—As Soon As Possible.

This done, he ran after Kelly, calling loudly.

"Wait for me! You ain't leaving me behind! The stakes are too high!"

VIII

Myrna Loy was wet. She was beautiful, sophisticated and sexual. But she was all wet.

No one seemed to mind very much. Or if they did, no one complained. The way most of them figured it, a damped-down Myrna Loy was better to look at than each other. So they looked. And enjoyed. And each man entertained his private thoughts.

It was night and raining again. Raining hard. And the roof of the shed in which the chaplain was showing the movie to the men of Maitland's company leaked badly. The great white sheet on which Myrna Loy shimmered and shook was stained with water, and often the sound was out of synch with the movements of the actors' lips. Still, it was better than being outside.

The men huddled under their ponchos and shelter-halves and sucked on moist cigarettes and studied Myrna Loy as she played out a love scene with her leading man. The actor pressed his lips to the back of her hand, asked her to remain in his apartment. Her refusal was delicate and tinged with irony, a faint amusement at the human condition. Big Joe's men empathized; they too found the human condition less than perfect.

Outside, in counterpoint to the thunder and lightning, the flash and din of an artillery salvo. And then another in answer. The men shifted and shivered, concentrated on the wet white sheet. Myrna Loy made ready to leave.

"Don't go!" one of the onlookers yelled without hope. "Stay with the guy!"

"Don't go!" came the company's expression.

"Be nice, Myrna . . ."

Myrna Loy turned back. A great cheer went up, and faded away as the two figures on the white sheet came closer together.

"Ooh," Ford sighed.

"Ohhh," Gutkowski moaned.

"Ahhh," Mitchell breathed.

The male star loomed over Myrna Loy, face close to hers. Her eyes flickered and finally shut. His mouth came down on hers and her arm snaked lightly around his neck, fingers playing at his hairline.

The men yelled at length, loud and profane. The image on the white sheet faded to black.

Big Joe squatted under a ground sheet next to Little Joe. He dug cold beans out of a C-ration can with a fork and shoved them into his mouth, chewed with an expression of distaste. He drank from a wine bottle, as if to wash the taste of the beans away.

"A lousy billet," he bit off.

"Oh, it ain't so bad," Little Joe said.

"A lousy chaplain."

"Oh, he ain't so bad."

"And now a lousy movie."

Little Joe brightened. "That Myrna Loy's so pretty, isn't she? Look at her muscles."

Big Joe glanced up at the screen. It was a bright, sunshiny day on the white sheet, and Myrna Loy was laughing. She was happy. *What the hell was there to be happy about?* Somewhere outside, a truck strained and groaned to make its way through the thickening muck. By Joe shut the sound out of his ears; let some other poor bastard worry. He focused on Myrna Loy.

"Why can't we be doing it with real dames?" he

muttered, putting the beans aside. "Not just watching."

"Some guys like it this way," Little Joe said thoughtfully.

"I don't like just watching."

The sound of the truck was louder now, almost as if its driver intended to join them under the leaking shed. Annoyed, Big Joe twisted around. The truck was parked twenty feet away, and entering the shed were two familiar and suddenly unwelcome figures, Crapgame and Kelly. Big Joe heaved himself erect, his huge shadow blotting out Myrna Loy.

"Hey, sit down!"

"You're spoilin' the picture!"

"Hey, jerk, outatheway!"

Big Joe faced the advancing men with feet planted and hands on his hips, Little Joe's ground sheet draped over his head and hung down his back, making him look like a bedraggled bedouin.

"Awright," Big Joe bellowed, his voice commanding and fearsome. "Cut the picture."

The movie voices wobbled down to a weird scratch and then nothing. A big closeup of Myrna Loy held on the white sheet. Some of the men continued to watch.

Big Joe pointed. "What's that truck doing there? I don't want no truck parked near the movie house."

"You know Crapgame," Kelly said, his face showing nothing, his eyes wary, measuring.

"I know Crapgame," Big Joe said, "and I don't like him. So what's he doing here?"

Crapgame shuffled forward. "Supplies, Joe."

Big Joe kept his eyes on Kelly. "Supplies for what? You got no orders to load up any supplies. And without orders, you don't get any supplies in this outfit."

Some of the men were standing now, moving closer, listening and trying to understand.

"Yeah, Kelly," a voice called. "What d'ya need supplies for?"

"You got a secret mission, Kelly?"

That drew a laugh and the men who had continued to look at Myrna Loy stood up, pressed in around the others.

Kelly let his eyes travel from face to face, waiting until he had their attention. The decision had to be made here and now and he wanted to bring as much pressure as possible to bear on Big Joe. The tough sergeant was a worthy opponent, wily and persuasive, and he had the power of command on his side. It was something Kelly understood. He almost smiled.

"We're going for the gold, Joe," he said, in a clear, controlled voice.

Gradually the mood under the leaking roof altered. All levity drifted away and a concerned quiet took its place, the quiet of doubt and fear and a deep craving.

Big Joe swore briefly. "Kelly, *you* may be going, but *we're* not. So take those flaming trucks off my lot."

"Say, Kelly," Mitchell said tentatively. "What gold is this you're talking about?"

"Yeah," Ford said. "What gold?"

"Get out of here, Kelly," Big Joe warned.

The men shifted in closer, forming a tight circle around Big Joe and Kelly and Crapgame.

"Tell us about this gold," Little Joe urged.

"Where is it?" Gutkowski wanted to know. "Where is it?"

Shouts of interest went up, a barrage of questions, a mounting enthusiasm. Big Joe felt an expanding resentment, and anger. This was all Kelly's fault. He

had come here deliberately to stir up the men, to get them on his side in this crazy scheme of his. Well, balls to that! No marked down brass was going to put his company into an unnecessary and incredibly dangerous bind. Not for gold or broads or booze. He swung around to face the men.

"Yeah," he said tightly. "There is gold. And it's in a town thirty miles *behind* the Kraut lines. All you got to do is fight your way in, fight your way to the gold, and fight your way back out again. That's what Kelly's after, for you dogfaces to put your lives on the line so he can get rich. Him and Crapgame here. It's crazy." He waited for the men to agree, to mock Kelly, to send him away. There was only a reflective quiet, except for the distant artillery barrage. "It's *crazy*!" he repeated.

"No, it's not," Kelly said. "Makes a hell of a lot of sense when you know how much gold there is."

"How much?" Little Joe said.

Kelly took his time, letting the anticipation build. At last he spoke. "Sixteen million dollars. Sixteen million. It's waiting there, tied in a ribbon, and gift-wrapped for the first guys smart enough and gutsy enough to get into that town and take it. Now do we go and get it or do we wait for the Third Army to lay their lousy thieving hands on it? Is that what you want, for those guys with the ties to get rich?"

Kelly fell silent. The expected response didn't come. The men looked at each other suspiciously. They lacked trust, he decided. It's this lousy war, he told himself, does it every time.

"Kelly," came a voice from the rear. "How do you figure to get through the enemy lines?"

"We've done it before," he said, with more confidence than he felt.

Little Joe cleared his throat. "It's those Krauts, Kelly. You know how they are—unpredictable. They shoot at you."

"We've done it a hundred times before!" Kelly insisted.

"That was an accident that time," Gutkowski said.

"Yeah," Little Joe agreed. "We got lost."

"What's the difference?" Kelly replied. "We can do it."

"The gold's in a bank," Ford said slowly.

"How do we blow the bank?" Mitchell asked reasonably.

"And how do we get out?" Ford added.

"That's the prize question," Big Joe gloated. "How do you get out, Kelly?"

Kelly stared at the sergeant. "We've got ourselves a section of tanks."

"That's right, fellas," Crapgame agreed.

Gutkowski inched forward. "You talking about that bunch of screwballs down at the supply depot? Those guys are crazy!"

"They got four Shermans," Crapgame said quickly. "You got to see the engines, all in prime working order. The trouble is, you got no faith in people, Gutkowski."

"I got faith in General Eisenhower, that's who I got faith in. And then only when I agree with his ideas."

"Nobody's going!" Big Joe said, raising his voice, a heavy blast of suppressed rage. "Nobody's going anyplace. So you can forget all about it, all of you."

An uneasy murmur went up and quickly ended as Big Joe glared at the circle of faces. Only the incessant rain on the roof could be heard now and the occasional blast of artillery.

Crapgame broke the silence, barking words in clear

annoyance. "If this was a democratic outfit, there'd be a vote."

"This is the Army," Little Joe said. "You want democracy, go home."

"I'd like that," Gutkowski said. "I'd like to do just that."

Big Joe arranged his battered features in what passed for a pleasant expression. "I don't want my boys coming out of this war dead heroes. Nor dead millionaires. Sometimes," he went on, directing himself to Kelly, "sometimes people do get killed. But I do my best to see it don't happen through carelessness. Or laziness. Or greed."

Crapgame snorted cynically. "Big Joe, the earth mother of us all."

Big Joe jabbed his finger in the direction of the supply sergeant. "The only time you ever come out of your hole, Crapgame, is when you smell profit."

"Sure. And I'm coming out now because this is a good proposition. A winner."

Big Joe spit. "Maybe for a quartermaster who spends six days in seven keeping himself out of the range of gunfire it is a good proposition. But for dogfaces like us, we are at the rough end of a broken bottle all the time. Staying alive is a full time occupation for me and my men. Getting from one day to another is a long, hard haul with lots of unfriendlies anxious to see you don't make it. And some of them are supposed to be on *our* side," he said, glaring at Kelly balefully. "We ain't about to risk our necks for nobody nor nothing."

"A million dollars a man is not nothing," Crapgame said loud enough for the men in the rear to hear. "*A million a man.*"

"A million is nothing," Big Joe shot back, "if a man is too dead to spend it."

Kelly decided it was time for him to play a larger role. He stepped forward, hands spread placatingly. "Joe," he said pleasantly. "Figure it this way. The risk we'd be taking over the next three days would be no worse and no better than the risks we've been taking in the last six weeks."

"So?" Big Joe snarled.

"So this—this time we'd be fighting for us, Joe. For *ourselves*, not the big brass."

"Kelly," Big Joe said emphatically, "the only time you get to lead my people against the enemy is when you got official orders and some gold bars *on your* shoulders."

"I need only one gold bar and I got it, right here in my hand."

The attention of the men held on Kelly as he pivoted slowly in a half circle, the gold bar held high so that everyone could see. From deep in the circle of men, someone sighed softly.

Crapgame stepped forward, his manner brisk, businesslike, a salesman hurrying to close the deal. "Now you guys, how would you like to be the one to send one of these little trinkets home to your mother? It is compact, neat, just the right size to be slipped into your hip pocket and so easily transportable. And gentlemen, every one of these babies is worth three thousand, five hundred good old American bucks per bar."

"Men," Kelly added. "There's about four thousand more where this one came from. What do you say we go after them!"

"Let's take a vote," Crapgame suggested happily, recognizing the lust gleaming out of the eyes that surrounded him.

"Let's vote," Kelly agreed.

Big Joe took a short step forward. "Okay, you guys. You want to solve the problem in the demo-

cratic way . . ." Another step and his big fist came up. "Here's my vote!" He hit Kelly alongside the jaw and the lean soldier went over like a felled redwood. Before Big Joe was able to straighten up, Crapgame hit him behind the ear. He followed Kelly to the ground. Little Joe launched himself in Crapgame's direction and all at once a free-for-all broke out, punches being thrown from every direction. Someone knocked over the movie projector which started feeding film through and Myrna Loy began performing against the leaking roof of the shed.

No one stopped to watch.

The plateau was dark and windswept, an eerie place that unloosed strange and frightening sensations in men. Here the recent fighting had been heavy and the toll paid by both sides was veiled by the night, but not concealed from the living who shuddered and tried not to see.

A jeep rolled tentatively forward, the driver hunched over the wheel, peering ahead as if fearful of what he might see. Close behind, not daring to lose contact, came two half-tracks. Except for the drivers, the vehicles were empty.

The men of Maitland's company slogged along in the mud, slipping and stumbling in the oozing goo, trying to be quiet in the sucking slime. Big Joe, bearing the scars of the recent melee, led one column. On the other side of the shining track that passed for a road, Kelly headed another column. His right eye throbbed where Big Joe's fist had landed and he explored a cut inside his mouth with the tip of his tongue. Another man might have enjoyed his victory over Big Joe, the fact that he had gotten the sargeant to come along on this fantastic treasure hunt, but not Kelly. His mind ranged ahead, trying to anticipate, to

foresee trouble and so avoid it; or find ways to overcome it. He wanted this mission to work out perfectly.

Out of the night, the sobbing of grown men. They were, Kelly told himself, trained killers. But men seldom killed with grace and even more seldom died easily. A scream of anguish went up and a cry for help.

"Bring a litter over here!"

"Medic!"

"Never mind. Too late for a medic . . ."

Close by, someone was crying openly and unashamed. Kelly went to see and found an American soldier huddled over the body of a friend. The soldier didn't look up and Kelly didn't disturb him. Friends were a luxury in war, a painful luxury. He moved on, boots squashing in the mud and water.

Flares arched high into the sky, drifted slowly down, casting eerie shadows, making it seem that death and madness were everywhere on that plateau of loneliness. Kelly imagined he saw bodies hanging from trees and from wire fences like awkward scarecrows; but that could not be, he assured himself, knowing it could be. Knowing it *was*.

The sputtering flares went out and as if that was a signal the wind came up, thin and chilling, whistling through gorse and thornbush, raising a tinny warning on the telephone wires. Curses sounded softly and the wind carried the harsh gutteral of cultured German voices to the G.I.'s.

A figure loomed out of the dark, joints locked with terror, eyes blurred at viewing the unseeable, brain numbed at knowing the unthinkable. It was a German soldier, face contorted, arms outstretched, fingers curled like defensive claws. A scream slithered wetly out of that gaping mouth and the soldier stumbled and went down, began to whimper. "*Mutter. Mutter.*" He

crawled past the silent column of watching Americans and disappeared. No one thought to raise a weapon in the German's direction; clearly, he was no enemy.

The columns advanced. Again the sound of German. Kelly went toward it, weapon ready. Ahead a small flickering. He crouched and moved on. Abruptly he stood up, flipped the safety on his gun. Big Joe stood up ahead, looking down at a German field radio. Next to it, a pair of dead signalmen, reaching for each other like star-crossed lovers. A small coffee pot bubbled, over a still burning fire. Big Joe turned off the radio and smothered the fire with the remaining coffee.

Big Joe looked around. Kelly looked around. There was nothing to see. At once, black shadows were racing toward them through the night. And there was the undulating sound of revving engines. A column of German scout cars sliced across their line of march. No one moved.

The scout cars stopped and an authoritative voice called out anxiously, "*Wo ist das Hauptquartier des Funften Corps?*"

When no answer came, the question was repeated, more urgently, as a curt command. Abruptly Kelly understood. That officer, of a high rank evidently, had spotted them, assumed they were German troopers, was asking for directions. Kelly stood up and pointed in a direction that would take the scout cars away from the route they were following.

"*Dahin nocht einkilometer weiter*," he said in his most precise German.

"*Danke*," the officer said, and ordered his driver to continue.

Kelly and Big Joe watched them disappear. "Nice," Big Joe said grudgingly. "Very nice."

"We better take off . . ."

"Let's move out . . ."

The men of Maitland's company pushed on. It was still dark when they came within sight of the farm. A few nondescript buildings scattered at the base of a hill, some trees, a dirt road.

"What do you think?" Big Joe said, squinting into the darkness.

"There's a light in the house," he said flatly.

A quick explosive triple sounded on their right. They all ducked and waited.

"Our guns," Big Joe commented without emotion.

Kelly grunted. "Seems like somebody considers us a worthwhile target."

"That's not funny," Big Joe said.

"You're right, it's not funny."

Big Joe stood up. "Let's go down there and take a look. Gutkowski, take the point."

Gutkowski swore imaginatively as he obeyed. Spread out behind him, forming a loose triangle, Mitchel and Cowboy. They advanced cautiously, weapons ready, tension gripping them, each man alert and anticipating his own imminent death.

Gustowski made it to the near wall of the farmhouse without incident. He edged quietly along the wall to the door. He filled his lungs with air, brought his M-1 down to the level and kicked the door open, charged inside, blinking against the glare of a naked lightbulb.

Across the immense country kitchen, a German soldier was looting the cupboard, his hands full of trinkets. He took one startled look at Gutkowski and bolted toward an open doorway. Gutkowski swung the M-1, holding the German in his sights until he disappeared into the adjoining room. *Pow!* Gutkowski told himself. *Scratch one Kraut, if he'd wanted to kill*

him. He looked around the kitchen, no longer concerned with the German.

There was a bowl of fruit on the table and Gutkowski helped himself to an apple. He dusted it off and took a bite, went into the next room. The German wasn't there. Just the farmer and his wife, and their three children; they lay on the floor in the absurdly angled positions dead people often assume. Gutkowski studied the room. There was a large hole gaping in the ceiling and the dull night sky was visible, the work of an artillery shell. *Theirs or ours?* Gutkowski reached down and set an upended chair on its legs.

He went into the hallway, chewing on the apple, broken glass tinkling underfoot. Past the stairs leading to the upper portion of the house was a door. Gutkowski opened it. The looter was pressed against the far wall, cringing in terror. In his left hand he held some trinkets; and in his right hand, a rifle. At the sight of Gutkowski, he dropped the weapon. It clattered noisily to the floor.

Gutkowski took a final bite of the apple, tossed the core away. Without haste, he pointed the M-1 at the German and pulled the trigger. The man's mouth opened but no sound came out. He fell on top of his rifle and Gutkowski continued his search of the house.

Kelly picked his way past the well in the front yard to a wooden building in need of painting. It looked like it had been built as a garage, meant to house the farmer's tractor, perhaps. But now it smelled of ether and disinfectants. Kelly pushed the door open and went in.

A dozen German soldiers were lined up on the ground, all wounded and too far gone to help. A

woman in a nurse's uniform was bent over one man, ministering to him. At Kelly's entrance, she slowly stood up and turned to face him. There was no surprise in her manner. And no fear. She might have been pretty, Kelly decided, if she got a good night's sleep and lost the flat reflection of horror that showed in her eyes.

Kelly looked past her to where a French priest kneeled next to an infantry captain. There were rosary beads in the officer's hands and the priest rocked back and forth on his knees as he pronounced the last rites. Kelly glanced back at the nurse.

"They will soon all be dead," the nurse said in English.

Kelly nodded gravely. Outside, a salvo of bombs fell nearby. The ground under shuddered and some of the wounded men moaned. Kelly turned to the nurse, speaking in German.

"*Woh Liegt Bourse?*"

"*Rechts*," she said politely. "*Funf hundert meter, dann links.*"

"*Danke*," Kelly said. He backed out of the garage cautiously, his carbine at the ready. In the yard, the jeep and half-tracks were properly spaced apart and waiting. The men stood around in small groups, smoking and talking. Big Joe sat behind the wheel of the jeep. Kelly pulled himself in beside the sergeant.

"Well?" Big Joe said.

"To the right, 500 yards. Then the left fork."

"Any Krauts up there?"

Kelly shrugged. "Didn't find out. We'll know when we get there."

"That's good, that's very good."

"We better get started."

"Into the half-tracks!" Big Joe bellowed. The men obeyed.

"Put on your headlights," Kelly said.

Big Joe shifted his huge bulk around to face him. "You think that's smart? We'll be targets for everybody who's got a gun, our people and theirs."

"Maybe it'll give us an edge. The Krauts won't be looking for a bunch of dogfaces rolling along like they were on parade. Let's try it."

"You said it." Big Joe switched on the jeep's lights, ordered the drivers of the half-tracks to do the same. He ignored the protests of the men. "All right to move out now?" he said, with barely disguised irony.

Kelly dropped his chin on his chest and stared through the winshield into the night. Big Joe slammed his hand against the gearshift and hit the gas pedal hard. The jeep leaped ahead. Once on the road, he spun to the right and sped off, gaining speed rapidly.

At the crossroads, the German military policeman was unhappy. Things were being done badly, revealing a lack of planning, of organization. Some incompetent officer was to blame and should be punished. Must be punished. The M.P. intended to make a full report of this night to *his* officer.

There was, first of all, the convoy, and it was of paramount importance that it be allowed to continue on its way to the front without delay. After all, it carried vital supplies of food and ammunition and so was of the highest priority. Yet it was making almost no progress.

That was because of the troop carriers, empty, of course, that blocked the road, forcing the convoy to wait their passing. Worse were the horse-drawn wagons of the French farmers of the region. They did not seem to understand that a war was in progress, that the future of Europe depended upon the soldiers of the Third Reich. To a French farmer only his vegeta-

bles mattered, his cabbages, his mushrooms. It was as if the French believed their eternal sauces were more important than winning the war.

The M.P. waved at one farmer to get his wagon away from the crossroads, to wait until ordered to proceed. The farmer ignored the signal, drove on, and the M.P. went forward, shouting in his broken French.

An officer from the convoy called out to the soldier. "How long must we remain here? Our mission is being endangered by this delay."

"A few minutes, Herr Captain. It is these French farmers, they have no concept of the correct methods of handling such matters."

"Clear them out quickly, please."

"Yes, sir."

The military policeman took only two or three steps when the bright glare of headlights appeared, speeding down the road toward them. He drew up in despair. *What fools were these, breaking blackout regulations?* He would deal with them! He planted his booted feet firmly on the road and raised both hands.

"Make those idiots turn off their lights!" the officer screamed.

"Yes, Herr Captain."

The M.P. squinted toward the oncoming lights, unable to identify the vehicle, unable to see past the blinding nimbus. He didn't see Kelly stand up in his seat, didn't see the carbine in his hands, didn't know when it began to spit out its short rounds. He went over on his back, spurting blood, dead before he hit the ground.

The officer, calling to his men, charged forward, fumbling with the holster at his belt. A slug caught him on the bridge of the nose, plunged downward, deflecting off his clavicle, tearing through on lung,

exiting just above his kidney. He would die the following afternoon.

The column hit the crossroads with all guns firing, the night turned into geometric patterns of tracers, of glare and reflections, of spangled shafts of mirrored light. It was all speed and sound of sudden death and excruciating pain, of blaring klaxons and skidding tires, of men running, of killing, and of dying. A long hammering roar that transformed the night into confusion and panic.

The jeep and the half-tracks turned left at the crossroads and sent a wagon crashing off the road onto its side, the farmer spread-eagled in the ditch, his skull fractured. They sped on, still shooting at everything that moved, at everything that didn't move. At everything.

Abruptly the headlights went out and no American weapons were heard. But at the crossroads, uncertain men still shot at shadows and movements, killing their own kind, filling the night with their fear and their excited voices. A crippled horse kept bleating out his pain for a long time until a German soldier who had been a farmer located him and put a bullet in his skull. Only then was it quiet again.

IX

The girl was young. Sixteen, perhaps younger. And there was a strange cast to her pretty face that made her presence in this place at this time seem like an accident that she expected to be repaired momentarily. She stood just inside the wall of the apple orchard holding onto her bicycle and studying the alien scene. It reminded her of a cowboy movie she had once seen in which the wagons of the pioneers had been drawn up in a circle to meet an impending attack by hostile Indians. So it was now with the jeep and the two half-tracks, forming a loose defensive perimeter against the outside world.

Otherwise, a peaceful vista. The sun was a blazing chip, low in the sky, and promising a hot day. Birds could be heard, singing and beating their wings in the apple trees.

The girl leaned her bicycle against the gate and moved forward quietly but without stealth, her curiosity aroused. She paused a few feet from the nearest half-track to study the white star painted on its side and the yellow stamped letters below it. Under a trail of numbers which identified the name and the mark of the vehicle, she saw words:

General Motors. Detroit. Mich. U.S.A.

She considered the words. Only the U.S.A. meant anything to her. She walked around the back of the half-track and looked at the soldiers asleep in their sleeping bags within the armored circle. Asleep they were so vulnerable, she thought, and so weary. Only then did she see that within reach of every out-

stretched hand there was a rifle, or a carbine, or a submachine gun.

Careful, so as not to wake the sleeping men, she padded among them, studying their faces. They were not a pretty crew, their hair disheveled and unwashed, their cheeks stubbled, their clothes stained. But they were Americans, the first she had ever seen, and somehow they were different than other soldiers. The Germans who came around were always dressed properly and were clean-shaven; they looked like soldiers. A sound caught her attention and she turned, eyes coming to rest on a small fire not far from the jeep.

She moved toward it. Coffee bubbled in a battered blue-and-white pot. It smelled good. Her eyes widened with fear. *Who* was making the coffee? A shiver of fear rode down her spine and she looked back toward her bicycle. Beyond it, beyond the orchard wall, on the narrow white road, an older woman was wheeling her bicycle toward the orchard. This was the girl's mother. The girl started toward the gate. She took only three steps when she heard the loud, ominous double-action of a round being loaded into the breach of a carbine. She sucked in her breath and held herself very still. After a long contemplative moment, she turned around.

She saw Kelly sitting in a tree, legs dangling, carbine pointed loosely toward her. He smiled a small smile and nodded briefly. Encouraged, she stepped backwards toward her bicycle. Kelly shook his head in disapproval and gestured, an indication that she was to remain where she was. Kelly put a cigarette between his lips and lit it, all the while looking out toward the road. He drew hard on the cigarette.

Ten seconds later, Big Joe materialized from the other side of the orchard. Carrying his maps, he had

been scouting the countryside in an attempt to locate precisely where they were. His polished head shone in the early morning sun and he wiped sweat from his upper lip. His expression hardened when he saw the girl and he looked up at Kelly questioningly.

"There's another one coming up the road," Kelly said in a conversational tone. "Could be this one's mother."

Big Joe made his way around the circle of sleeping men. He kicked some of them awake and cursed softly at others.

"Awright, grab your socks. We have got company, visitors. On your feet, you crumbs. Mitchell, get that sexy smile off your face and wake up."

"Oh, Sarge," Mitchell groaned. "She just told me yes, called me lover-boy."

"You wouldn't know what to do," Big Joe said. "Up and at 'em."

None of the men got out of their sacks, moaning protests and rolling over, aware from Big Joe's manner that they were secure from sudden destruction. At least, for the moment.

"Up, up," Big Joe insisted. "It's a new day and we got things to do, places to go. This is your war, guys, and I know you don't want to miss even one thrilling second. Adventure, travel, exotic sights are all yours in the goddamned Army of the United States. *Now get your asses up and out!*"

Nobody moved.

Without warning, the young girl screamed. It was a shrill, penetrating cry designed to alert her mother to the presence of the soldiers in the orchard. It did much more than that. The men came scrambling out of their sleeping bags, reaching sleepily for their weapons. Others, unable to free their legs, stumbled and fell. A couple of men, believing they had heard an

air raid warning, rolled under the half-tracks. Big Joe waited until they had quieted down, had located and identified the girl for what she was. A Mephistophelean grin angled across his full mouth and the hard eyes shone brightly.

"Awright!" he shouted. "It's a woman. You all know the nomenclature so don't panic; you must've seen one before. Get ready to hit the road."

The men made an effort to appear more presentable. They combed their fingers through their hair, buttoned trousers, tucked in shirts, and put on their boots. They stopped pointing their weapons at her. A few of them managed to smile.

Suddenly the orchard gate burst open and the older wóman came marching through, body pitched aggressively ahead, face set, her jaw a monument to French determination to save the honor of its virgins. The soldiers watched her come with interest and a growing distress. She displayed no proper respect for their numbers or their weapons.

She paused a few feet from where the girl stood and held out one gnarled, weathered hand. The girl went to her mother.

"*Maman*," she murmured shyly, "*ils sont Américains*."

"*Fermez!*" the mother commanded and the girl fell silent. The mother let her stern eyes go from face to face. She did not like what she saw. "You 'ave frightened my daughter," she said in surprisingly good English.

Big Joe stepped forward. "We're sorry about that, ma'am. That wasn't our intention."

The woman gazed at the bald man with a noticeable lack of cordiality. "You are Americans," she accused.

"Yes, ma'am," Little Joe admitted. Then, trying to win her over, "We've come to liberate you."

She was not impressed. "We 'ave come to pick apples," she declared in a loud voice. "This is our orchard."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Big Joe said. "I guess we should have asked your permission. But in the circumstances—"

"There's a war on, ma'am," Corporal Job explained.

The woman turned a scornful glance his way and he ducked his head. "You realize," she said to them all, "that if the Germans discover that you are here, there will be a nasty battle . . ."

"Oh, you don't have to worry, ma'am," Mitchell said cheerfully. "We can take care of ourselves."

"If there is fighting," she replied coldly, "these trees will suffer."

Big Joe sweated faster. He should never have listened to Kelly, never agreed to come on this mission. This was ridiculous, arguing with this French broad, wasting time . . . "Lady, if the Germans show up I promise you that we'll leave your orchard. Okay?"

She folded her hands across her waist. "Very well." She studied the men around her thoughtfully, reached a decision. "I shall take my daughter away now and will return this afternoon for the picking. By that time, I am sure that you will all be gone away from here."

Big Joe looked at Kelly who studied his cigarette.

"Now, lady," Big Joe began.

The woman started toward the gate, pulling her daughter by the hand. "Hold it right there," Kelly said, voice edged with authority. The woman looked back and he smiled ruefully. "I'm sorry, ma'am. But you can't leave until we do."

"You believe that we would inform upon you?"

"We can't take chances," Big Joe said.

An expression of displeasure crossed the woman's face and her mouth flattened out. "You said you 'ad come to liberate us. It seems instead we are your prisoners."

"Now, lady," Big Joe said, anxious to be understood. "It ain't that way at all. All we mean is—"

Kelly dropped down to the ground from his perch in the tree. "You said you came to pick apples," he remarked. "So why not pick apples? It'd be a shame to waste all this good weather. Nobody's going to bother you or your daughter."

The girl gave Kelly a long, searching look, a look of cool female interest. Her mother recognized the expression on her daughter's face for what it was and reached for her hand.

Big Joe shuddered. The old lady intended to leave and he couldn't let her do that. But how in hell was he going to stop her? He opened his mouth to speak but Crapgame beat him to it. The little man, dirtier and more evil-appearing than ever, shuffled forward, hands spread apologetically.

"Hey, lady, how would you and the kid like some real coffee? It's good stuff. Kelly here is a first-class coffeemaker."

The woman looked at the dark bubbling brew on the fire. She took a deep breath.

"*Merci, merci,*" she said, not smiling. "That is most generous of you."

"We Americans are like that," Crapgame explained seriously, leading the way. Little Joe hurried to find two clean tin cups; this was difficult to do.

Big Joe glared at his men, watching in a kind of mesmerized reverie. "Awright, you slobs, you never seen a girl walk before? Get down to the stream and

get washed. You're all filthy. We got ladies in the house. You Mitchell, out of that sweaty bag of yours. This ain't no Bowery bum house. Get moving, and I mean *now!*".

From her place at the fire, the girl looked back, searched for Kelly. Their eyes met and held and it was Kelly who finally severed the connection.

The men of Maitland's company had done their best. They were combed and washed, even if their uniforms were no cleaner. Big Joe went from man to man, inspecting their weapons, but few of them paid any attention to him. Their eyes were riveted on the young girl who was busy picking apples, dropping them into a wicker basket. Now she reached for a high limb and a long expanse of white thigh was visible. She plucked the apples she wanted from the branch and dropped them in the basket, assumed a normal position. There was an audible exhalation from the men.

At the fire, Crapgame talked energetically to the girl's mother, who seemed fascinated by the dirty little man.

Big Joe continued his inspection, Corporal Job at his shoulder, checking ammunition. "How much you got, Fortune?" Job asked of one soldier.

"Seven clips, thirty loose. Seventy."

"Be careful, Fortune," Big Joe said. "Don't go firing at sounds and ghosts."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Ford?" Job asked.

"Ninety."

"Kelly?"

"A hundred-and-ten."

Big Joe peered into the muzzle of Ford's rifle. He grimaced. "Ford, there are powdermarks in there,

powdermarks. Don't you know enough to use a clean patch when you're cleaning your piece. Wise up, man!"

Big Joe stepped in front of Kelly and examined his weapon without comment, returned it. Kelly snapped it shut and shoved an automatic clip into place, yanked at the bolt to slide a cartridge into the breach and clicked the safety catch into place. He put the carbine down and studied the girl. Sixteen, he decided. Surely no more than seventeen. And very good to look at. Very comfortable in her own skin, aware that she was pretty, aware that her body was full and firm. How long since he had been with a girl like that? He was unable to mark the time accurately. There was a familiar twinge in his loins and his throat felt dry. He drank some more coffee.

Corporal Job went on with the ammunition check. "Gutkowski?"

"Sixty rounds."

Big Joe stared narrowly at Gutkowski. "You are trigger-happy, Gutkowski."

"I do my job, Sergeant."

"Little Joe?" Job said.

"Hundred-and-twenty."

"Grace?"

"Hundred-and-twenty."

"Fisher?"

"Hundred-and-forty."

"What war you been in, Fisher?" Big Joe asked.

Fisher grinned and looked innocent. "I was driving the truck a lot, sergeant."

Big Joe didn't return the smile. "Not at the crossroads you weren't driving anything, Fisher. I got my eye on you."

"Babra?" Job said.

"Seventy-five."

"Mitchell?"

"Twenty-five."

"You fire a hundred rounds last night?" Big Joe wanted to know.

"No, Sergeant. They must've fallen from my pocket."

"That's terrific," Big Joe said, voice thick with sarcasm. "That's very good, Mitchell. Keep it up. Kelly! Give Mitchell a couple of your clips."

Kelly nodded and dug two clips out of his pocket. He tossed them swiftly to Mitchell, one after the other. Mitchell, standing on the far side of the campfire, caught the first clip, but misjudged the trajectory of the second. It fell off his fingertips into the flames.

The men dived for cover instantly.

Kelly grabbed the young girl and pulled her behind a tree pressing himself protectively across her.

A cacophany of explosions erupted, bullets zinging about wildly, a short miniature war, full of fury and danger. The birds fluttered out of the trees, screeching their outrage. Riccochets screamed off the flanks of the half-tracks and the acrid stink of cordite corrupted the clean morning air. Slowly, almost reluctantly, silence floated back to the orchard.

Behind the tree, the girl's arms circled around Kelly and held him tight. Her fine breasts were solid against his chest and her gently rounded stomach pressed up against his.

Behind the jeep, the girl's mother pushed Big Joe and Little Joe off her, an indignant expression on her face. They stood up and drew her erect.

Everywhere, men stood up, looking warily at the campfire, listening for another exploding round. They heard only the birds returning to their perches.

Kelly helped the girl to her feet and walked away without a backward glance.

At the fire, Big Joe stared balefully at Mitchell; he wiped perspiration from his brow in short, nervous strokes. "I'm sorry, Big Joe."

Big Joe drew down the corners of his mouth. "Mitchell, you'll be the death of me."

"Hey, butterfingers," Kelly yelled, and held out another clip. Mitchell wet his mouth. Kelly heaved the clip, across the same distance, at the same pitch. Mitchell lunged, hands reaching over the fire. He caught the offering and grinned at Kelly. Kelly grinned back.

Big Joe went over to the half-track to inspect its guns. He was very serious.

Big Joe sat on one side of the girl's mother and Crapgame on the other. Little Joe served her breakfast with all the style and grace of a professional waiter, which he once was.

Nearby, the other men of the company ate with unaccustomed politeness. They smothered their burps and held their curses to a minimum and made a point of not spitting on the grass. It was, after all, the Frenchwoman's grass.

The girl concentrated on her food, aware of the men being aware of her. At the far end of the group, Gutkowski leaned against a tree, rifle loosely in hand, standing guard. His cold eyes were on the girl.

Off to one side, Kelly, stripped to the waist, studied his face in a small metal mirror he had stuck into the crook of a tree. He shaved carefully, conscious of the girl, and remembering the soft cushion of her body beneath him, the scent of her, struggling not to think beyond that, not to remember emotions and sensations

from other times, other girls. Trying hard not to remember the pervading wet warmth, the rich fulfillment of a woman's body. It was very difficult not to remember. He forced himself to listen to the girl's mother.

"I presume," she said to Crapgame, "that you are upon some dangerous and vital mission?"

"Yes, ma'am," Crapgame replied earnestly. "Very dangerous, very vital."

"Important for the winning of the war?"

Crapgame allowed that it was very important for the winning of the war, saying that the successful completion of the mission would be a major triumph of American ingenuity and the free-enterprise system.

The woman seemed impressed. Her alert eyes fixed on Kelly. "And that is your officer?" she said.

The men hesitated, looked at Kelly and then at one another. Finally Big Joe spoke up. "Why yes, ma'am. How did you guess?"

She smiled her satisfaction at being right. "He appears to be the only man who shaves."

On the other side of the fire, Mitchell bit into an apple, chewed reflectively and held it aloft. "This is sure a good apple, ma'am, a Cox's orange pippin."

"You know about apples?" the woman asked.

"We got apples like these in California."

The woman leaned forward, eyes bright with interest. "You are from California?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Tell me, what kind of grapes do you use in California?"

Mitchell responded energetically. "Mostly it's a black grape which is called . . ."

Against the tree, Gutkowski shifted his position, eyes flickering from the girl to the mother and back

again. He cleared his throat and spoke out of the side of his mouth to Kelly.

"We could have some real fun," he muttered, "if we could just get rid of the old lady." He looked at Kelly, a bold, challenging look as if he knew he was including the other man in something Kelly didn't want. "Isn't that a fact, Kelly? The little girl is a juicy piece. Wouldn't you like to get yourself some of that?"

Kelly wiped the last of the lather off his cheeks. Almost lazily, he reached out, fingers closing on the front of Gutkowski's shirt, yanking him close. Kelly's voice was thin and his eyes were stony. "That guy last night. You could've blown the whole mission. But you had to kill him, to chalk up another score. There was no need to shoot him."

"He was a Kraut."

Kelly released the shirt in disgust. "You're a killer, Gutkowski, a real killer."

"That's the name of the game," Gutkowski said blandly. "It's what we all do, Kelly. Even you . . ."

The sun was higher in the sky, hot and white, illuminating and drying out the earth below. In the orchard, Crapgame was demonstrating his talents to the girl's mother. His fist closed around a pair of dice and his eyes were clamped shut in concentration, his emotions focussed. He jiggled the dice and murmured imprecations to gods unknown to lesser men, to devils and saints, to fates and mysteries unnamed. He whirled and hopped and swung his arm like a discus-thrower, slipping and sliding as he tossed the dice.

"Sixes!" he cried.

His audience peered at the two white cubes.

"Sixes it is," Mitchell said admiringly.

Crapgame swaggered over and retrieved the dice, accepting the verbal admiration of the other soldiers with modesty.

"And this is the national sport of America?" the woman said.

"Yes, ma'am," Crapgame said solemnly. "It's called crap."

"And this game is played in schools?"

"Crap schools, ma'am."

The mother could not conceal her skepticism. "Demonstrate, once more."

Crapgame was pleased to oblige.

Not far away, Big Joe, hanging precariously in the upper branches of an apple tree, was working hard to orient his map to the terrain. Army map makers, he decided, left much to be desired.

Further along, close by the stone supporting wall where the valley dropped down to a swollen stream, the girl continued to pick apples. Gutkowski came up behind her. She felt his presence but didn't turn.

"Hi," he said thickly, moving closer.

She held herself still, suddenly afraid.

Gutkowski let his eyes roam over her, the fine wide shoulders, the narrow girlish waist, the full round hips and strong straight legs. He could almost smell the penetrating woman smell of her.

"Listen," he got out. "I want to give you something."

She turned to face him, not fully understanding his words but aware of what the sound of him meant. His eyes fixed on the neckline of her blouse, at the pale swell of her breasts.

He drew a string of pearls out of his pocket and let them dangle freely. "See. Aren't they pretty? And for

you. I'll give them to you. I want you to have them because you're pretty and I like you. I like you a lot."

He reached out and looped the pearls around her neck, fingers playing lightly over the smooth skin. He felt his body stiffen, the desire form up into a tight knot, a driving force that would not be stilled, could not be controlled. His fingers closed around her throat . . .

Kelly could see it all from his place on the hill. He came up on his feet, ready to launch himself down toward them, to destroy Gutkowski before he could hurt the girl, to wipe him out . . .

"Hey, Kelly!" the voice spoke with urgency.

The soldier's name was Penn and Big Joe had assigned him and Kelly to guard duty on the hill. Penn pointed into the clear sky. Kelly followed the gesture. Two planes were swooping toward them with deadly intent.

"P-47s!" Kelly said.

"P-47s," Penn agreed.

"Take cover!" Kelly screamed to the people in the orchard. "Cover! P-47s!"

The planes burst overhead in a roar of high-powered engines, a crash of sound that sent men scattering for safety, crying out in alarm and cursing.

Big Joe leaped out of his tree, hit the ground running.

Crapgame dropped his dice, snatched at them and missed, grabbed them finally and began to run.

Big Joe looked into the sky, saw the P-47s making a wide and very graceful turn. "It's the Air Corps!" he yelled. He grabbed the mother by the wrist and pulled her along.

"But isn't it your Air Corps?" she protested.

"That's it!" Big Joe bellowed. "That's it exactly . . ."

"They seen the tracks of the vehicles," Little Joe screamed, breaking through the orchard.

Above the planes settled into a steep dive, leveled out for the attack.

Men spilled out of the orchard, leaped for the nearest ditch, doing cartwheels over a stone wall, burrowing behind ridges of vines. Gutkowski dragged the girl into the valley. Big Joe pushed the mother down behind a wall and Crapgame dived head first down a well. Men swore and shook their fists as the planes began their run.

"There goes sixteen millions bucks!" someone cried mournfully.

"Keep your heads and butts down," Big Joe commanded.

The planes swooped in at treetop height, zeroed-in on the company vehicles, rockets whooshing out in front. A succession of dull thuds came soon after, a roar of white heat, and billowing black smoke. Here and there, men began to stand up.

Almost casually, the planes circled high into the sky, not troubling to confirm the results of the attack; flying off in triumph, certain they had struck a blow for freedom and victory.

Big Joe walked into the middle of the field and shook his big fists at the sky like some ancient patriarch forsaken by his God.

Kelly came slowly down the hill; it was time for them to go.

The road was little more than a narrow cart track, rutted and dusty under the blazing midday sun. Mitchell and Gutkowski were on point; twenty yards back, Kelly and Big Joe, with the French girl. She walked easily, keeping up with the men, as if this was something she had done before. The other members

of Maitland's company stretched out behind in two columns. Corporal Job, carrying a fifty calibre machne gun brought up the rear with Crapgame, still wet from his sojourn in the well.

The two lead men stopped at a junction, looked back. The girl pointed to the right fork and the march resumed. The girl allowed her mind to reach back to the orchard; her mother would be there still, she thought, remembering the reproach in her voice.

"*This orchard, it was there in my great grandfather's time. It has survived wars, drought and disease. It was there that my husband courted me. In those days, man was not so wicked . . .*"

Kelly glanced over at the girl walking at his side. There was a resolute quality to her face he had missed earlier. What was it she had said to her mother?

"*I'm going with the Americans. They must meet their friends. They require a guide.*"

Big Joe jerked his head toward the distant hills, looked questioningly at the girl, pointed.

She nodded, and heard again her mother speaking sadly:

"*Believe me you will never come back to me. You will end up dead or in Paris as a prostitute. I know what war is like. The flags are different but the men are the same.*"

The girl felt sad but her resolve hadn't weakened. What she was doing had to be done and she alone understood the depth of her emotions, and the fullness of the need to be a part of this venture. Her mother's voice drifted again into her ears, calling after them as they marched away:

"*I shall rebuild the orchard and these trees will grow again when soldiers, all soldiers, are rotting in the graveyards of Europe.*"

Big Joe moved closer to the men on point and Kelly and the girl walked side-by-side, careful not to touch. They moved into a vineyard and soon the white dust of the soil fertilizer drifted up to coat their uniforms and line their dry throats. Men began to cough, to complain.

"Shut up!" Big Joe bellowed.

"The grapes will help," the girl said to Kelly.

He ripped off a bunch of ripe grapes and popped one in his mouth. The others followed his example, chewing on great bunches of grapes, spitting pits, the purple juice staining their mouths and running down onto their shirts. It was hot going and they were tired and dirty, their eyes were dull, their mouths slack.

"How about a break, Sarge?" someone shouted.

Big Joe gave no sign that he had heard. The march went on.

Kelly spoke to the girl. "You're very young to come with us this way."

"I am old for my time."

"You're a child."

"I am old enough to have been a wife."

Kelly showed his surprise. "So you're married!"

The girl faced the front. "My husband is dead."

They walked silently on, each lost in his own thoughts. It was Kelly who spoke first.

"I'm sorry."

The girl shrugged. "He was a bad lover." She laughed mirthlessly. "There is a rumor about Frenchmen, yes, that all are excellent lovers. Like all rumors, it possesses only a suggestion of truth."

"You sound bitter."

She looked away. "On the other hand, my husband was a very good patriot. In a time when Frenchmen have surrendered too often and too quickly to the

Boche, to be a patriot is no easy thing. The Germans killed him in the Dufresne prison. I have been told that he was tortured to death."

"The bastards—"

"I did not love my husband, but he was a good man. Now I hate Germans and I am very good at hating. That is why I offered to guide you to your friends. Do you understand?"

"Hatred is something I never cared for very much. It consumes people."

"If a man cannot understand anger then he understands nothing." She walked faster, moving ahead. Kelly made no attempt to catch up with her.

Five minutes later they were out of the vineyard and back on a road; the walking was easier. At once, Gutkowski whirled around, rifle raised high above his head, pumping it up and down rapidly.

"Enemy troops!" Big Joe husked, signaling the men to take cover. Kelly led the girl across the ditch, behind a hedgerow. Minutes later, a long slow column of German trucks rolled past, each filled with infantrymen.

Kelly glanced sidelong at the girl. She was frightened by this closeness to the Germans but there was no sign of panic in her unlined face. Kelly smiled at her.

The men of the company made good use of the break. Some stripped off their shirts and wiped their chests dry; others lay back, eyes closed, resting; still others opened their boots, allowed the air to cool their feet.

After a while, the growl of truck engines faded into the distance. Corporal Job stole a look at the road. "All clear," he announced.

"Off and on," Big Joe said. The march resumed.

Soon they were climbing a gently sloping hill. Fat

sheep grazed with apparent unconcern as the soldiers shuffled past them. Most of the men were stripped to the waist, chests and shoulders gleaming under the hot sun, their faces dripping sweat under the steel helmets.

Kelly and Big Joe walked on either side of the girl, automatically taking protective positions. Big Joe was breathing hard but his bright eyes ranged ahead, alert for any signs of danger. Near the crest of the hill, the inviting line of a shadowed forest loomed dark and cool.

"We'll take a break there," Big Joe said.

"There could be trouble," Kelly said. "Some Nazi squad might be sighting down on us right now. Let's spread out."

"You're right," Big Joe said, signaling the men into a skirmish line. They took up positions across the hillside, spaced five yards apart; the men on point continued to edge ahead.

The girl measured Kelly. She recognized something different about this one, a quiet authority, a sense of importance. "If you are an ordinary soldier," she said, "why is it that you give the orders to the others?"

Kelly made a face and turned away.

Big Joe laughed harshly. "He used to be an officer, miss. But no more. I guess some of that brass sticks to a man, like a bad habit."

"Why are you no longer an officer?" the girl wanted to know.

"I got fired."

"Why?"

Kelly ignored the question.

Gutkowski, who had disappeared beyond the treeline, now came back into sight. He whistled shrilly and waved them on.

"Let's get up there!" Big Joe bellowed. The skirmish line advanced up the hill.

They stopped under the trees for ten minutes before moving on. Soon the trees opened up and they found themselves crossing a pleasant meadow, the footing easy, the rich green scent of grass in their nostrils.

"I still want to know why you are no longer an officer?" the girl persisted.

Kelly decided to answer, aware that Big Joe was carefully tuned in, as were the men nearest to them. Kelly concentrated on some point in mid-space and began to remember. He kept it simple. "It was in Sicily. My outfit hit the beach and got the hell off quick as we could. We took this town and in this town there was an alehouse. Me and my men occupied that alehouse all night and let me tell you that was pretty powerful stuff. Those Sicilians, they know how to make a good ale.

"In the morning, at dawn, we were still swallowing the stuff when orders came through. The general told me to take the first of three hills outside the town. So we took the hill. It was so much fun that I ordered my men to take the second hill. And then the third. It was a cakewalk. You never saw a company fight the way my men did. Really cleaned up those hills in a hurry."

Big Joe frowned. "I don't get it. With that kind of enthusiasm, you win medals, Kelly."

"Yeah, most of the time. You see, on the first hill there were Germans, lots of Germans, so there we did pretty good. But the second and third hills were being held by United States Marines."

Big Joe began to sputter in delight. "You mean you really took the Marines on, Kelly?"

"I really did."

"But are not Marines Americans, too?" the girl said, puzzled.

"Exactly," Kelly said. "And the general didn't approve of his men fighting other Americans."

"And so you were fired?" Little Joe put in from behind.

"Did they do like they do in the movies," Crapgame wanted to know. "Did they hold a big parade and march you out and have all your regimental buttons sliced off by some big brass with a silver sword?" He laughed.

"That appeals to you, Crapgame?" Kelly said dryly.

"Yeah. Taps being played and you being drummed out like some flaming movie actor. Terrific!"

"Well, I hate to disappoint you, Crapgame. They just suggested I quit."

"Suggested?"

"Suggested, a strong suggestion. So I quit."

Big Joe laughed softly. "Those Parris Island pansies must've been real disgusted at being took by a crummy infantry outfit all tanked up on Sicilian brew."

He continued to laugh periodically through the rest of the afternoon and no one asked what was funny.

Late in the day they made it into a thick forest, a carpet of dappled green underfoot, shafts of sunlight breaking through the leafy canopy. There was a peaceful stillness broken only by the singing of birds and the occasional scurry of a squirrel. They went forward without speaking, the men deep in their own thoughts, knowing this was only a temporary hiatus in their lives, an unreal interval separating them from the frightening reality of the past and the deadly reality of the future.

Abruptly, they stopped, rifles swinging to the ready, taking up positions behind tree trunks. Ahead, the scouts were frozen in place, hands raised. Very

quietly, putting one foot carefully down after the other, Big Joe led the patrol forward. Ahead, the ground fell away in a sharp incline, ending in a tumbling river in a shallow valley below. They looked down.

There, a trio of young girls, splashing about in the river with three young men, their clothes on the bank. The men were German soldiers; the girls were beautiful and naked.

One of the girls broke out of the water, scrambled ashore, frolicked about, playfully pursued by one of the men. Her neat breasts jiggled in the sunlight and shade; an erotic ballet staged by an intuitive choreographer. The man caught her and together they went to the grassy carpet, the girl laughing and squealing, the man's husky tones carrying up the crest of the hill.

Just inside the treeline, no one spoke. No one dared. The scene below had reached them all, the naturalness of it, the beauty, the open sensuality of life and love without guilt. Throats were thick and chests ached and blood rushed into their cheeks. They were defenseless before the sight of those naked young people . . .

The girl broke the mood. "Give me a gun," she said tightly. "I will shoot them."

Kelly was horrified. "You'd shoot them—the way they are?" The image of a bullet tearing through that fine young flesh, destroying, ripping, ruining forever, made him sick and weak. "You'd shoot them naked?"

"The women," the girl said coldly. "They're French."

Kelly looked again. The others had come out of the river, had formed a circle and were dancing around the couple on the ground. At once they too were on their feet, joining the dancers. The men were singing in German and the girls in French.

Big Joe, lying on his stomach, drew the back of his hand across his mouth. There was a dull throbbing in his temples and he was filled with a longing that he had fought so hard to suppress. He hated the naked people in the valley; at the same time he loved and envied them. They were so happy, so full of life. Big Joe was sure he stunk of death.

Next to him, Gutkowski spoke under his breath. "Right through his ass, a clean shot."

Big Joe glanced sidelong at the other man. He was sighting down the barrel of his M-1, finger tightening on the trigger. Big Joe's hand slammed down on the rifle, clamping it against the ground. His face was close to Gutkowski's, eyes glittering.

"Some day," he said between clenched teeth, "you'll be the death of me, Gutkowski."

Gutkowski grinned after a moment and clicked the safety back into place.

Big Joe pushed himself erect. Kelly looked questioningly up at him.

"They want to look," Big Joe said defensively. "So let them look, there's no charge." He marched deeper into the woods and came back reluctantly.

Kelly attended the scene below. The dancing had ceased and the naked people were coupled off, each locked in a tight embrace. The soft sound of throaty voices drifted up to the crest of the hill.

The girl faced Kelly, her eyes hooded, her cheeks flushed. He refused to look at her. After a moment, her hand touched his wrist, tentatively, then closed in a fierce and powerful embrace. The contact was too much for Kelly and he rolled over and stood up.

Big Joe stood a stride away watching. The fleshy face was implacable, the hard mask of war and responsibility. Kelly lifted the corners of his mouth in what he intended to be a friendly smile.

Big Joe was not amused. "Sixteen million dollars," he said quietly, his voice showing nothing. "That's what we're after, not a few sexy minutes. So get your asses in gear, you crummy bastards, and let's get to where the gold is . . ."

The men came erect silently, faces closed and averted, each afraid of what he might reveal of himself should he show himself to another man. Big Joe waved them forward and they followed, holding tightly to their weapons. It was all they had.

X

They trudged downward out of the forest and back into farmland, climbing ditches, plodding across pastures, trying to avoid the droppings of scrawny French cattle, filing tiredly across a plowed field, through a gate, which Mitchell carelessly closed behind them. The latch failed to catch and the gate drifted open again. Some of the cows meandered through the opening, mooing softly. Suddenly there was a loud explosion. Kelly whipped back to see a cow on its knees covered in smoke and lowing out its agony.

"Mines!"

Elsewhere in the field, frightened cows pounded away. Another explosion and a cow fell over, kicking and shaking until it died. Some of the beasts headed back to the gate, seeking safety. One beast, knocked sideways, brought down another animal, who struggled to get free.

The air was filled with the bellowing of the wildly charging beasts and the yells of the soldiers who were locked into place in defense against the mines.

The girl, face distorted with anguish and pity, started toward one of the wounded beasts. Kelly stopped her.

"Don't move."

"Please, they're hurt."

Kelly gazed at the wounded cow as it thrashed about. He pointed and called to a soldier nearest to it.

"Ford!"

Ford unslung his carbine. He aimed carefully and killed the animal with a single shot. Half-a-dozen additional shots finished the other cows that had been injured and, abruptly, silence descended upon the field. The remaining cattle wandered back through the gate to safety, leaving the soldiers poised in the field like strange, awkward sculptures done by a demented artist.

Big Joe's broken face was lined with fury and fear. He stood with one foot reaching, in the middle of a stride, not daring to shift to a more comfortable position. Partly, his anger was directed at himself for not being alert to this possibility, for not having the men search the field before they moved into it; and he was embarrassed, as if caught naked in broad daylight doing something forbidden and now unable to flee. His head swiveled and he saw the girl.

"This is a fine mess you got us into!" he roared.

Kelly swore. "It wasn't her fault," he said quietly.

"The hell it wasn't! Look at us, sitting ducks for man or beast or airplane, theirs or ours."

"Well, you're in charge, Big Joe, get us the hell out of here."

Big Joe showed his teeth, but no one would have called it a smile. He studied the scene with disgust and displeasure, brain turning over rapidly. The men were beginning to regain their composure, to talk to each other, and some were digging around their feet with their bayonets, probing for mines. Big Joe remembered something. He located Mitchell out on the flank.

"Mitchell!" he shouted.

"Yes, Sergeant . . ."

"Where's that diviner's rod you're supposed to be carrying."

"It got burned up at the orchard."

"I thought I told you never to let it get away. You was supposed to carry it on your person always."

"I'm sorry, Big Joe."

Little Joe, poised on one leg, his other raised high and quivering, piped up, his voice shrill and worried. "Hey, Sarge, what are we going to do?"

"First thing," Big Joe grumbled, "you get down off that leg. You look like a pregnant stork."

Nobody laughed.

"Maybe there's a mine ready to blow where my other foot would be if I put it down," Little Joe explained.

"I'll take that chance," Big Joe said.

"*I'm* not taking that chance," Little Joe argued.

Big Joe glowered at the other man. "Okay, then stand one foot on the other foot. I can't stomach looking at you that way anymore."

Little Joe very carefully lowered his leg. When it rested firmly in place, boot upon boot, and he hadn't been blown up, he smiled happily. Nobody was watching him.

Kelly had begun prodding his bayonet into the ground around the girl, moving slowly, exploring with his fingers first for loose soil, soil that was unevenly packed. Satisfied at last, he motioned for her to sit down. "You may as well be comfortable," he said.

She crossed her ankles and lowered herself delicately to the ground. Across the field, Maitland's men were doing the same thing, getting comfortable for what they expected might be a long wait.

Kelly took a fresh pack of cigarettes out of his shirt and lit one. The girl looked hungrily at the pack and on impulse he handed it to her, along with his lighter. "Here," he said, not looking at her. "You keep 'em."

"*Merci*," she murmured.

"Hey, Sarge," one of the soldiers complained, "I

got a big hornet buzzing around me. It is very hostile."

"Shut up," Big Joe said. "You want every lousy Kraut in the neighborhood to come shooting at us?"

"Hey, Sarge!"

Big Joe turned his head and spotted Gutkowski on the road, safely out of the minefield and grinning cheerfully. He had been scouting off to the right and had managed to avoid this predicament. Big Joe wanted to slug him—hard.

"Hey, Sarge," Gutkowski said.

"What?"

"Sarge," Gutkowski said with the joy of discovery in his voice, "there's a big notice pasted up on the fence here. It says, Attention Minefields. In German, of course."

"Of course," Big Joe growled. "That's very nice of you to tell me, Gutkowski. But to make sure, why don't you walk across to me so we can see if that notice is lying."

Gutkowski replied sincerely. "Oh, no, Sergeant. I believe that notice."

Big Joe closed his eyes briefly and cleared his mind. When his eyes rolled open, he had his bearings, was thinking clearly. "I want you two scouts to take up defensive positions on the farthest corners of the field. Anybody comes, you let me know and be ready to fight. I have to figure a way out of this mess. Corporal Job!"

"Here, Big Joe!"

"Set up that .50 and cover the field to the west."

"Right, Big Joe." Job began digging around his position with his bayonet. He lifted his head. "Everything is clear. I'm ready to go."

"Good," Big Joe said.

A desperate voice called out. "Big Joe, I'm standing

on my toe and my foot's falling asleep." It was Little Joe.

Big Joe spoke with strained patience. "Do like the others, get your bayonet out and prod. Then you'll be able to stand normally."

"I can't get to my bayonet without falling over!" Little Joe wailed.

"GET YOUR BAYONET OUT!" Big Joe roared.

Startled, and off balance, Little Joe fell down, screaming. He hit the ground and sprang up in the air as if bouncing off a trampolin. The tension drained out of his bony face and a look of wonder came into his eyes. He grinned sheepishly.

"Hey, there's no mine here."

"Terrific," Big Joe said. "Now be quiet and let me think." He turned to Kelly. "You're a lot of help to me, Kelly."

Kelly shrugged. "What do you think I ought to do, Big Joe?"

"Just be quiet and let me think."

Kelly dragged on his cigarette and made a point of not looking at the girl.

On the east border of the field, Cowboy, probing in the dirt, heard a metallic clink. He paused. "Hey, Sarge, I think I found a mine."

"Be careful now!"

Kelly stood up. "Watch for boobytraps!"

Cowboy made no answer, dug slowly, using his hands. At last he uncovered the panshaped object. "Hey, Sarge," he called, "it is a mine!"

"What kind?"

"I don't know. It's just a mine to me."

"Don't fool with it," Kelly shouted. "Put it out where it's highly visible and don't go near it."

"Right," Cowboy said.

"Nice of you to take an interest, Kelly," Big Joe said.

Kelly sat back down. "That's the way I am."

"Hey, Sarge," another soldier called.

"You found another mine?"

"No, Sarge, it's just that I'm getting hungry."

A rapid flush climbed Big Joe's neck, spread up his cheeks. "I'll feed you my fist when we get out of here." He struggled to calm himself. "Mitchell! I want you to start prodding toward Corporal Job. "You, Ford and Cowboy, you start going towards Little Joe. Little Joe, you start toward Barbara. Barbara, I'll come your way."

"The name is Babra, sarge."

"Big Joe," Kelly said, without emphasis.

"What?"

"Look there."

Big Joe followed Kelly's finger. At the north end of the field, another gate, and standing behind it, peering curiously at the goings-on was a bull. Big Joe's face lit up and he grinned appreciatively at Kelly. He put his hands to his mouth and shouted. "Gutkowski! Gutkowski!"

Gutkowski appeared from behind a stone wall at the far corner of the field. He waved.

"Get up to that gate," Big Joe called. "Talk to that cow."

Gutkowski looked into the next field, then yelled back: "That ain't no cow, Big Joe. It's a bull. You can tell it's a bull because it's got . . ."

"Okay, so it's a bull. Drive the goddamned thing into this field."

Gutkowski advanced along the hedgerows, up toward the gate, moving without haste and with considerable caution. Big Joe swore under his breath and quietly urged him on.

"What are you going to do?" the girl asked.

"We're going to talk to that bull," Kelly told her.

She looked puzzled.

Gutkowski reached the north gate and opened it, taking up a position behind the bull. The huge dark beast stood there, head low and swinging menacingly from side-to-side, assessing this unexpected access into the field. He snorted and took a step or two.

"That's a good bull," Gutkowski urged. "Go on, take yourself a little walk . . ."

The bull minced forward.

"Is that a nice bull?" Big Joe said. "That's what I call a very nice bull. Come on, bull, come to Big Joe. Come on . . ."

"Come on, boy," Kelly called. "Come on, darling."

"Where's Big Joe's little bull?"

"Come on, baby," Ford cooed. "Come to your lover . . ."

About twenty feet into the field, the bull halted. He eyed the upright creatures scattered about, listened to the sounds they made. He pawed the earth and tried to make up his mind about this unusual vista. He had never seen so many men at one time before and wasn't certain it was a good thing. He listened.

"Here bull," Little Joe pleaded. "Here brownie. Come on, big feller."

"Hey, bullsie. Bullsie woolsie. Right this way, champ. Be a winner, this way."

"Let's go, Ferdinand, step out, now. No need to be afraid. Nobody's going to do a thing to you, baby, nobody at all . . ."

"No sweat bull. Honest, and that's no bull—"

"Come to Uncle Joe," Big Joe husked. "Come on, just a few more steps this way."

"Here, beauty," Kelly said. "Come to me, boy. Come to me."

"Brownie, Brownie come to your lover boy. Come this way . . ."

The bull picked his way into the field cautiously, surveying the men without enthusiasm. The great head swung about and he strained to see the north gate; it was still open and the still available escape route seemed to reassure him. He advanced slowly again.

"That's my bull," Big Joe said, voice low and gravelly, at his most seductive. "That's a beautiful-looking bull and don't anybody tell me different . . ."

The bull veered off at an angle and stopped. He turned broadside to them, as if comtemplating a retreat along the same path. The great head sank lower, rocked in a slow, searching arc.

"Little Joe," Big Joe called. "He's looking at you. Go ahead, call him."

Little Joe shivered. "I don't like cows, Big Joe. I'm a city boy."

"That's a bull, stupid. Now call him!"

Little Joe nodded, spoke in a small, tight voice. "Come here, feller, come and have some of my chocolate." He extended a half-eaten Hershey bar with almonds. The bull moved toward him.

"That's it," Big Joe said. "Keep it up."

"Big Joe!" Gutkowski yelled, from the north end of the field.

"Big Joe waved for him to be quiet.

"I think I hear something, Big Joe."

Big Joe listened briefly, waved an acknowledgment. "Okay," he muttered. "Okay." But he remained concentrated on the bull and Little Joe.

The bull was closing in on Little Joe and without warning was licking his face. Terrified, Little Joe tried to avoid the great rough tongue and at the same time keep his feet in place. It was impossible to do.

"Let him lick!" Big Joe commanded.

"He's friendly," Kelly said.

"Yeah," Little Joe got out. "He's friendly, friendly."

"Don't do anything to frighten him," Big Joe said, with sudden harshness. "You frighten that poor bull, Little Joe, and I'll—"

"I won't frighten him!"

"Send him this way," Kelly urged.

All the men were calling to the bull now, offering a variety of enticements: chocolate, chewing gum, tobacco. One man yanked a red bandanna from his pocket and gave a poor, pinched imitation of a matador working his cape. The performance was lost on the bull.

"All of you," Big Joe cried. "Shut up. Stop mixing that poor bull up. Kelly, you call him."

Kelly spoke in a low, soothing voice. "Come on, boy. Here, you beautiful beast. Come on, old son. Step this way, baby. Right over here."

The bull minced toward Kelly, ears twitching.

"Look at it," Little Joe marveled. "He's house trained! He likes people. He trusts us."

Big Joe's face was gleaming with perspiration now. He took off his helmet and wiped his sleek head. "Little Joe, you put yourself into the bull's tracks. Follow them up to where Gutkowski is and you and him point your carbines in the direction of those trucks."

"What trucks are those, Big Joe?" Little Joe said pleasantly.

"What the hell trucks do you think! The trucks Gutkowski heard a little while ago. The trucks I heard. The trucks every flaming one of the men heard except you. German trucks, you idiot."

"Oh," Little Joe said. "Sure, Big Joe." He strutted

happily toward the gate, sitting his feet carefully into the bull's tracks.

Behind him, Kelly stroked the wide flat skull between the bull's ears. The huge animal seemed to enjoy it and he pushed closer. Kelly looked over at Big Joe and nodded. Big Joe began to call to the beast, trying to entice him. The bull shifted his attention to the other man and Kelly took the girl's hand, stepped carefully into the bull's tracks, following Little Joe out of the field.

"What will happen now?" the girl said, when they passed through the north gate to safety.

"Now?" Kelly looked back. Big Joe was walking in the bull's path, and so were Penn, Jonesy, Grace, Bellamy, Willard. Petchuko and Babra were closest to the bull, snapping their fingers, trying to gain its interest. "Now, we'll wait for the others to get clear."

"And the trucks?"

Kelly lifted his shoulders. "We'll do what we have to do." He listened. "There's still a little time before the convoy gets here. Maybe we'll be lucky—" he ended, knowing that he had never believed much in luck.

The sun had fallen low in the sky and long shadows covered the field and darkness was not far away. Most of the men were out of the field now and under Big Joe's direction had taken up positions in the ditches and behind the hedges that lined the road. Some of them clutched grenades and all of them checked their weapons, making ready to fight. The convoy was much closer and the pitch of the engines left no doubt that they were of German make.

Only two men remained in the field, Mitchell and Corporal Job. They were on their knees alongside one another, begging the bull to come to them. But their pleas went unheeded as behind them, at the lower

gate, the cows had herded together, filling the air with their mournful lowing. The bull looked from the cows to Mitchell and Job and back again, clearly indecisive.

"Don't mind them critters," Job implored. "Just come over here."

"Stay loose, baby," Mitchell said. "Pay no attention to the ladies. They'll wear you down and leave you first time another bull shows. Come on over here, baby, and let me tell you how wonderful you are. Let me kiss you, baby. Come here and kiss me, honey, come on, come here. Oh, Lord . . ." He lifted his eyes to the darkening sky. "Just let that bull come here, and I'll never touch a piece of meat again, never let a steak pass my lips. On my word, Lord."

"Come here, feller," Job begged. "Come to your old man who loves you. Come on, brown eyes. Come on."

The bull shuffled forward.

The sound of the truck convoy was very loud and Big Joe waved frantically at Mitchell and Job, motioning for them to get down, not to show themselves. Job moaned his despair and heaved the heavy .50 machine gun around so that it faced the road. Mitchell, huddled beside him, began to feed an ammunition belt into the weapon.

"That damned bull," Job said. "He's marking our position."

"Go away," Mitchell said.

"For Jesus' sake, bull, go away."

"You're gonna get us all shot up, y'hear!"

"Beat it, feller. The dance's over."

Big Joe, behind a hedge, glanced down at the road, then surveyed his men. All were in place. At his side, Kelly was crouched down, two grenades on the ground in front of him.

"Unless the Krauts spot Mitchell and Job," Big Joe said, we don't shoot nothing. No firing at all. No grenades. Nothing. Pass the word."

The engines were louder and big Joe ducked down, clutching his weapon.

Kelly looked at him. "There are only two of them," he said.

"You're sure?" Big Joe said.

"I'm sure."

As if in confirmation, an open Volkswagen painted Wehrmacht gray came around the bend in the road and turned into the straightaway that led past the open fields. Behind the wheel of the Volkswagen, unshaven and wild-eyed, sat a fat little German officer, running a race with himself. Some twenty yards back was a heavy army truck trying to maintain the pace, its flatbed open to the skies, and rattling with spare automotive parts. Clinging to the sides of the truck, fearful of being jolted to the road below, were six terrified privates. From where he was concealed, Big Joe could see that none of the Germans were paying the slightest attention to the scenery on either side of the road. Soon they would pass and there would be no need for a fight. He breathed a sigh of relief.

The Volkswagen disappeared in a dip in the road, then returned to sight, speeding up the slight incline, cresting, and bouncing blindly along. Big Joe waited for them to pass.

In the field, the bull had grown petulant. He was being ignored and that made him unhappy. He stood over Mitchell and Job, rumbling out his displeasure. Suddenly without warning, he hooked his horns in Mitchell's side and with a quick jerk of his great head, rolled the soldier over.

"Hey!" Mitchell cried, annoyed and startled. "Knock it off!"

"Shut up," Job ordered.

"The goddammed bull. He's pushing me around."

The bull snorted and pawed earth, bellowing angrily.

"Get the hell away from here," Mitchell shouted. "Beat it, you dumb bastard!"

As if in response, the bull bellowed and swung the great head. The horns hooked into Mitchell's side and he felt himself being lifted into the sky. The world spun about in slow-motion, a hypnotic rise, almost euphoric, and a quick fall. He felt one horn penetrate his hip, slide off the bone and go deeper. He yelled out his fear and pain and the bull threw him again.

The fat German officer hit the brake of the Volkswagen and stood up, turning to see what was happening. The truck behind slowed down.

"*Brauch Euch Hilfe?*"

Big Joe cursed and began shooting. Everyone else, including Corporal Job, on the .50 in the field, joined in. The fat German officer did a strange, bloody dance, his flesh leaping and jumping under a succession of fearsome blows. The Volkswagen seemed to collapse under him.

The truck, now stopped, began to come apart. The roof was ripped off its cabin, the driver falling out the side, a bloody mess.

One of the soldiers made it to his feet, began to fire blindly into the field. He was riddled, head and body, and fell over the wooden siderail to the road below. The other soldiers died quickly, sliced open, their pink and red innards spilling out. The hail of fire and the blast of grenades went on. The truck disintegrated.

In the field, the bull, running from the overwhelming explosion of sound, bellowed and screamed in pain and fury.

Under the stone wall at the roadside, the girl opened her mouth to scream but no sound came out.

After a while, the shooting stopped. Smoke drifted slowly above the road and the smell of cordite was everywhere. From the remains of the Volkswagen and the truck, streams of blood and gasoline mingled, trickling toward the ditches. Nothing moved.

Big Joe stood up, Kelly beside him. They were both pale and grim. Soon the other men appeared, eyes wide, mouths wet, the adrenalin still flowing, their fear diminishing. Each was joyful that he was still alive and whole; they chattered like hysterical children caught in a pervading bloodlust.

"They never knew what hit 'em!"

"That guy's head came off! His head came off!"

"I emptied a full magazine!"

"We took 'em, really took 'em."

"That was great, great, just great!"

In the field, the bull roared in pain.

The girl, shocked and withdrawn, turned clumsily in that direction. Big Joe strode past her, face contorted, eyes narrow and wet. "Gutkowski!" he roared.

Gutkowski, on the road, was about to put a bullet into a still twitching body. "Yeah, Sarge?"

"You want us all to go up? This place stinks of gasoline."

Gutkowski nodded and up-ended his rifle, smashing the butt down on the German's head.

Seeing this, the girl retched, looked for Kelly. He stared at her, mouth tight, thumbing a fresh clip into his weapon. He remembered her words: "*A man who does not understand anger understands nothing* . . ." What she had been witness to had been anger. Anger and terror and a building frustration. What she had seen was war, men killing lest they be killed; men act-

ing without restraints. Kelly jerked around. The bull, bleeding and spitting, his flanks heaving, bellowed again. Kelly lifted his carbine and fired, almost casually. The sound choked off in the bull's throat and he lay still.

It grew quiet along the road.

Big Joe pushed through the hedges back into the field, called out to Mitchell and Job, who was still huddled over the .50 machine gun. "Come on, Job, Mitchell! You think we got all day? Let's move it." Neither man answered. "We gotta get going!"

Still no answer.

Big Joe looked at Kelly. He said nothing, climbed onto the low stone wall. From here his view of the field was unobstructed. Mitchell and Job lay without stirring, limbs turned awkwardly, in the manner of men violently killed.

Big Joe took a step or two toward them. "Job," he muttered. Job, who'd been with him since the outfit was formed, had followed him from Fort Jackson, had pulled him through the wire on Omaha Beach, who'd kept his trucks moving even when the Loire was flooded and nothing else moved, who never spoke unless it was necessary, who got things done. Corporal Job, whom Big Joe relied on, was dead.

"Mitchell," he grumbled. "My best scout . . ."

Kelly jumped off the wall and started up the rise toward the protective cover of the woods. He looked back; only the girl was following.

"Come on!" he shouted. Nobody moved. "*Come on!*"

One by one, they obeyed, leaving the dead behind. Big Joe was the last one to go. There was, he supposed, no reason to remain . . .

XI

It began to rain just after nightfall. It was penetratingly cold. Maitland's men waited, wet and miserable, in the forest at the rendezvous point; they had found a lean-to made of logs and most of the men had taken shelter, huddling against each other for warmth, commiserating with each other on the conditions of their existence. Bitching . . .

Kelly stood just inside the forest, peering down at the road below, a gleaming streak in the darkness. *Where were Oddball and the tanks?* Next to him was the girl, wearing Kelly's field jacket, rain running down her pretty face. A squall of rain blew in from the open field and Kelly and the girl turned back into the woods.

Ten feet away, Big Joe squatted like a soggy lump on the leeward side of a plane tree. The aftertaste of the battle at the roadside still clung to him, the sound of the shooting, the smell of gunpowder and of death. He stood up and paced back and forth.

Not far away, Crapgame, a poncho draped over his head and looking like a drowned Yogi, puffed on a damp cigarette, waving the smoke away.

Big Joe stopped prowling, glared at Kelly and at Crapgame. He spit and kicked at an exposed root. "What the hell gives you the idea those dumb spooks can even read a map?"

Crapgame kept his head down. "Oddball can read a map pretty good, Big Joe."

Big Joe walked away and turned back.

Kelly spoke. "Crapgame—"

"Yeah."

"Take the girl to the shelter."

"I would rather stay—"

"Take her," Kelly said toughly.

Crapgame stood up and headed deeper into the woods. The girl followed without further protest. Kelly, water trailing across his cheeks, stood listening.

"You hear anything?"

"Something," Big Joe said glumly. "Maybe some trucks."

"There's something out there."

"We're not waiting for trucks. We're waiting for Sherman tanks."

"Yeah," Kelly said.

"They were supposed to be here three hours ago," Big Joe said.

Kelly stared at him. "You want to quit." It was a statement of fact.

"Yeah," Big Joe agreed.

"If you quit now, you'll quit all along the line. Every action you go into from here to Berlin. You won't follow through on anything."

"This is different."

"Crap!"

"No crap. This *is* different."

"Not now, it isn't different. And you know that, Big Joe."

Big Joe pounded a fist into his hand and cursed the rain. "It's easy enough for you to talk. You got a ninety day furlough coming. I wish it was me. I'm sick of this man's war, sick of it." The wind seemed to reach into the woods, chilling him, as he hugged his massive body and looked sightless off into the night. When he spoke again, it was with a gentle conviction, a regret, and without hope. "That Job, I liked him. Did you know his name was Eugene? Eugene Job. He was

very close to me, Eugene Job. He understood me and me him. He was the only regular soldier in this outfit, the only goddamned one." He paused, went on when Kelly made no reply. "Job was the only man who had a—a sense of duty. You understand that, Kelly? I mean, do you really *understand?*" Again he waited and again Kelly said nothing. "Job is the only guy I know who deserved to be laid to rest with honors. Honors, Kelly, wrapped in the stars and stripes. Maybe you think that's cornball, Kelly. Is that what you think? I tell you Job deserved it." He faced Kelly squarely, eyes narrowed. "You left him, Kelly. You left him to rot in a lousy minefield . . ."

"Keep it up, Big Joe," Kelly said dispassionately. "You know what you're doing? You're talking yourself into it. Like some bleeding rookie shavetail who's trying to find ten good reasons for not going forward. I read you, Big Joe, loud and clear—you are thinking of quitting . . ."

Big Joe spoke with heavy deliberateness. "Those fairy bastards are not going to show."

Before Kelly could reply, Crapgame came pushing his way through the brush, flapping his rain sheet excitedly. His pasty face was ghostlike in the wet night. He directed himself to Big Joe. "You got a mutiny on your hands."

Kelly waited for Big Joe to speak, but he said nothing, made no move. Kelly jerked his head once and moved toward the lean to, Crapgame close behind.

Big Joe watched them disappear. Wearily he wiped the rain off his face. Seconds later he was drenched again. He exhaled heavily and looked again at the road below. It was still empty. They aren't coming, he told himself. They aren't going to show. *The gutless bastards . . .*

The lean-to was long and open at one end, perhaps ten-feet high and sloping down to half that. From the chips on the ground, it was clear it had once been used as a sawmill. The men huddled back in the low end for warmth and argued in muted tones, smoked cigarettes, and cursed the fates that had brought them to this place. They fell silent when Kelly and Crapgame appeared, a collection of blurred faces staring out of the darkness.

Crapgame moved across the damp carpet of chips and sawdust, but Kelly remained near the entrance. He stood with his legs apart, hands on his hips.

"What's going on?" he began.

It was Gutkowski who answered finally. "We've had it," he said.

"Oh!"

"That's right. We're going back to the lines."

"Who's we?" Kelly said.

"All of us," Penn put in.

"All of you," Kelly repeated softly.

"We've had enough," Ford said.

"Who cares about the gold anyway?" Jonesy said.

"Hell, Kelly," Cowboy said. "It's only money."

"There's nothing wrong with money," Crapgame offered.

"It don't mean anything if you're dead," another voice replied. "We're going back."

"The Shermans are due soon. When they get here you'll feel different," Kelly said, choosing his words carefully. "Tanks are good for morale."

"Crap on that crap!"

"No tanks are coming . . ."

"You gotta be crazy."

Little Joe appeared out of the dimness at the back of the lean-to, his hands turned upward, his manner

pleading. "Kelly, we lost two good guys today. Mitchell and Job should be with us now, but they're dead. Our transport's been bombed by the Air Force and the crummy tanks are overdue. We got no food and we're running short of ammo. And the goddamn rain keeps coming down like the flood. It ain't good anymore, Kelly."

"That's right," came a chorus from out of the darkness.

"It all turned back, Kelly."

"It's time to go back."

Kelly lit a cigarette and puffed deliberately. "So the tanks are late and it's raining."

"They're three hours late," Little Joe said.

"Hurry up and wait," Kelly said. "That's the army way."

"You know you can't trust those spooks nohow," Cowboy said.

"They're on their way," Kelly said.

"How do we know that?" Jonesy said.

"Yeah," Cowboy added. "How do we know?"

"What's the rush?" Crapgame said quickly. "So give it a little longer, huh? Give it till twelve. What the hell difference is a few hours?"

"If we leave now," Penn said, "we can be back in our lines by first light."

"The war is the same all over," Crapgame argued. "People are trying to kill you everywhere: So what's it matter if we stay here a while?"

"It'll stop raining by morning," Kelly said. "Traveling will be easier then."

"That's no good," Little Joe shot back. "We wait till morning and we're stuck out in the open for the whole of tomorrow. That don't make good sense."

"We got to go now!" Penn said.

"Right."

"Now. Tonight."

"Let's go now."

The mass of blurred faces surged out of the back of the lean-to, coming into sharper focus.

"Hold it!" Kelly snapped and the advance stopped abruptly. "You're going nowhere," he said grimly.

"The hell we ain't," Little Joe said.

There was the ominous scratch of metal on metal as Kelly rammed home the bolt of his carbine. He held it waist high and very steady.

"We're staying," Kelly said. "All of us."

"Dammit!" Gutkowski shouted, his voice climbing hysterically. "I am tired of being pushed around by somebody who's no more than a private first class, a broken-down officer. Let's ram that carbine up his ass!"

"Try it, Gutkowski, and you'll get it first."

Gutkowski took a step backward.

"Come on, Kelly, cut it. You're gonna get us all knocked off this way."

"All you care about is your crazy mission."

"You're worse than some West Pointer with a ramrod up his stinking officer's ass."

"Listen to me," Kelly said, his voice edged. "When we crossed the line last night, we stopped playing soldiers and became a bunch of hoodlums with one aim in mind . . . to blow a bank. You dogfaces seem to have forgotten all about that. Well, start remembering. And remember this, too, we don't operate by the Geneva Convention or the U.S. Infantry Manual. We are a bunch of gangsters with gangsters' loyalties and a gangsters' rulebook. In case anybody doesn't know what that means, I'll spell it out for you. It means that the number one rule is that anybody who gets in the

way is going to get his guts shot out. By me, hear! And that means you, Gutkowski."

"Kelly," Gutkowski said carefully, "it's ten to one against you. You can't win."

Crapgame clicked off the safety of his carbine. "Make that nine to two."

"I make it out to be eight to three." It was Big Joe who had spoken, standing in the entrance, his weapon cradled easily, but his muscles drawn taut, ready to spring into action.

"Jesus, Sarge," Gutkowski whined.

"Shut up, Gutkowski," Big Joe said. He gazed around at the line of soldiers disdainfully and took three strides forward. They retreated slowly. "This outfit has never started anything it has not aimed to finish. And nothing has changed that. You think because it's wet and the tanks aren't here yet that we are going to quit? Well, let me straighten you out—it don't mean anything of the kind. We are going to hang around until midnight. If there's no tanks by then, we start walking. *And not back to the lines.* we are bound for Claremont. We'll steal a truck, hitch a ride, but we're going to be above that town by tomorrow morning. Mitchell and Corporal Job—we already paid our dues in this mission and we go all the way in. We are going to take a large slice of dough out of Hitler's wallet, make it a little harder for him to kill G.I.'s. and no one is going to stop us. Okay?"

There was no answer. Tension held under the lean-to and the breathing of the men of Maitland's company could be heard over the fall of the rain. But nobody moved and with each passing second the drive of the men to oppose Big Joe and Kelly slackened.

Kelly backed over to Big Joe. He reached into his pocket. "Crapgame!"

"Yeah."

Kelly tossed the gold bar in the direction of the dirty supply sergeant. He picked it off the ground and hefted it joyfully:

"Beautiful," he murmured.

"Maybe the men have forgotten what they're fighting for. You remind them."

"Yes, *sir!*" Crapgame said.

He turned the bar over in his hand and sparked his lighter, allowing the flame to shine off the glittering metal. He extended the bar so everyone could see. When he spoke, it was in the flat tones drill sergeants use during basic training, talking fast and impersonally, and with all the authority of the United States Army backing him up.

"I have here in my hand a bar of metal which measures ten inches by two inches. It is yellow in color and heavy in weight. It is a form of currency known as gold. That is spelled G-O-L-D, gold. You will notice and remember that unlike paper money gold does not dissolve in the wet. Nor does gold catch fire. Nor does it get itself torn up in a barroom brawl. And when the cost of living rises, which it inevitably does, gold retains full value. Often it's worth more. This bar of gold which I hold in my hand weighs three pounds troy weight. That is a special kind of arithmetic used for weighing gold and other precious metals. At present market value, this here gold is worth six hundred and twenty dollars for each and every pound. Therefore this bar is worth how much? Ford, you answer!"

Ford considered the question sullenly. "Eighteen hundred and sixty dollars."

"Very good. That is correct. Eighteen hundred and sixty dollars for one gold bar. And where we are going to, there is a ton of this stuff—troy weight, of

course . . . now you men can figure that one out for yourselves and when you do I expect everybody to come up with the right answer, the same answer. R-I-C-H, rich. And that is good . . . very good indeed!"

XI

Squalls of rain swept across the fields and splattered down on the forest. Swift moving clouds passed from in front of the moon casting an eerie cold light on the earth below, to be replaced by other clouds that masked off the land again. Big Joe stalked the edge of the woods, expending nervous energy, trying not to think, not to remember the near mutiny of his command, not to anticipate what lay ahead.

"Crummy night," he muttered, to the sky. "Lousy night. One rotten night to fight a war."

He resumed his parade, casting an occasional inquiring glance to Kelly, who stood with the girl.

Kelly peered through the trees at the open land below, hunting signs of movement on the road, acutely aware of the girl with her back against the nearest tree, facing away from him. He wished they hadn't brought her and at the same time was glad of her presence, of the feelings she evoked in him.

"You believe this is correct?" the girl said, as if in answer to something he had said. But it had been many minutes since he had spoken and then only to make a bland comment about the weather.

"What?"

"What you are doing," she said accusingly.

"What am I doing?" He could see Big Joe striding back and forth, boots squishing water in the soft soil. "What is it you disapprove of?"

"You and your men landed in Normandy to fight a war for the future of mankind," she said passionately.

"Ah, yes. I remember something being said about that."

". . . You came to defeat an enemy we all hate . . ."

"I hate nobody right now."

". . . To die for things which are real . . ."

"I don't intend to die for anything. I expect to live for myself, understand *that*."

"You are going to throw your life away for money, like gangsters. I don't understand."

For a moment, Kelly didn't reply. Then he talked slowly, pronouncing the words without emotion. "I have seen soldiers who died trying to get some sausage for breakfast. I saw a man killed while hunting for a moment's shelter from the wind. A buddy of mine was killed trying to win a bet that he could run across an open field before a sniper could zero in on him; the sniper was quicker than he was. I saw a man killed trying to save another soldier's life. Stupid, silly, wise, noble; take your choice. It all adds up to the same thing—death. The politicians make grand pronouncements and the historians will write down the reasons for fighting a war, this one or any other. But no man dies for a good reason. Next week we'll all be back in the line, pulling regular duty. One day some of us will die for a general's pride, a bombardier's miscalculation, an officer's cowardice, or an artilleryman's mistake. Is that what you mean by dying for something real?" He waited for her answer: it never came. "At least in this mission, we're dying for ourselves . . ."

"I think you have forgotten what you are fighting for, Kelly."

"Perhaps I never knew."

"You knew, Kelly . . . *you* knew."

He tried to light a cigarette, but it was too damp. He tossed it aside.

"Kelly," the girl said softly. "You'll never make it. God is not on your side."

He laughed without humor, a short, scratchy sound. "If your God is anything like our Air Force, that could be a bonus to us all." He looked at his watch, his mind concerned with other matters. *Damn it, Oddball, where the Christ are you?*

"I am going now," the girl said sadly. "If I'd known . . . I would never have helped you."

She waited, as if expecting him to say something to her. He seemed to be listening, hearing sounds in the night not audible to less gifted ears.

"No," he murmured, almost to himself.

She ducked under a branch and moved off through the trees. Seeing her go, Kelly called out: "Hey, wait a minute! I never did find out your name. What is it?"

She swung back, mouth gaping as if to respond. But no sound came out. He went toward her. She lifted her face and he took her in his arms. Their mouths came together, lips working tentatively, joined, clinging desperately to each other. They came apart; his hand wiped the water out of her hair and she moved her head under his fingers, with a movement full of despair and longing. Like a weary swimmer reaching for a floating log going past, she reached for him, pulled herself close, and gave him her mouth. Very carefully, not concerned with the rain or the wet, soft ground, they went to earth, bodies straining, aware only of each other, the moment, and of themselves.

Flesh struggled against flesh, seeking and finding openings and projections, taking small joys in discovery and moving on to other rewards. In the rain and the dark, on the far end of the war, they learned about each other in an exchange of pleasures.

Later there was still the rain falling and the war waiting so that it was almost as if nothing occurred.

But something important had happened. And neither would ever forget.

Crapgame located Big Joe in the dark and fell into step beside him. He glanced at his watch.

"He ain't coming," Big Joe declared soberly.

"You're wrong."

"Oddball. The name fits him. You can't depend on an oddball in a war."

"You don't know his track record, Big Joe. Oddball's brought those Shermans of his through some of the worst battles in the history of tank warfare. He's a kook, but he's got a knack. He'll show."

"He's a nut."

"A reliable nut."

Big Joe glanced at his watch. "When? He don't get here soon, it's too late to do us any good."

Crapgame said nothing and the two men continued to pace back and forth. Suddenly Big Joe stopped. "Maybe I hear something . . ."

"Me too."

The two men looked at each other. A pleased grin spread across Crapgame's mouth, showing his false teeth. "What I tell you, Big Joe?"

Big Joe continued to listen. Through the rain, the distinctive squeals and clanks of metal, of tank treads, the heavy growl of the Chrysler engines.

"It's them," Big Joe muttered. "It has to be."

"It's them," Crapgame crowed happily. "Oddball is here!"

Kelly came out of the woods, peering down at the road. "Hey, Joe!" he called.

"I can hear," Big Joe said curtly.

They stood at the edge of the woods, three men-of-war, straining to be sure of what they heard, afraid to be wrong.

It was a clear signal now, unmistakable. The strained rubbing of worn metal plate upon toothed drive-wheels, the whine of the high-revving engines, the slow, jerking crablike monotony that could mean only one thing—tanks!

Crapgame opened his gamy mouth and a wild, exulting yell came out of it, expressing the triumph of greed over common sense, of venality over self-preservation. The men in the lean-to heard Crapgame's voice and immediately understood. They came scrambling to join the party.

"Those are internal combustion engines," Penn marveled.

"Man, those are Crysler V.6s," Ford added, a man strong on product identification.

Little Joe let out a war hoop. "Guys, those are Shermans!"

For an extended silent interval, the men stood in place, then as if on command, they broke for the road, leaping and skipping, calling out to each other, dancing happily down to meet the tanks. Crapgame trailed behind, doing a jig in front of Kelly and Big Joe, gloating openly, rubbing his hands together, the debauched features of his grimy face shining in the rain.

"Didn't I tell you!" he cackled. "Didn't I tell you! I knew he'd show. I said Oddball'd show and here he is. He came, he came, he came."

He did a high upward leap, almost fell coming down, went scampering after the rest of the company, his high-pitched laughter trailing behind.

Big Joe and Kelly looked after him. Kelly reached for a cigarette; they were too damp to smoke. Without speaking, Big Joe offered him a dry pack. They smoked for a few seconds before Big Joe's big head swiveled around. Kelly looked at him without expression.

"Okay," Big Joe said grudgingly. "So they showed. I was wrong."

He followed the men, his stride slow and sure, a man determined to reach his goal. Kelly watched him go, a wide, victorious grin spreading across his lean face. Abruptly, he sought out the girl. She no longer stood where he had last seen her. He pivoted slowly, surveying the terrain. She was fifty yards away, a silhouette against the black sky, walking back in the direction from which they had come, walking back to her mother's home, back to that orchard.

"Hey!" Kelly shouted. He took a few swift strides after her, calling as he went. "Hey! You! Woman! Where the hell do you think you're going!" She increased her pace. Kelly slowed down, stood still.

The girl stopped and turned, peered toward him. She saw an American soldier, his face an unidentifiable blur in the night rain, standing with his legs wide apart in a forest track. His arms hung stiffly from his shoulders, giving off a certain animal tension, the muscular readiness one saw in a cat before it attacked its victim. In his right fist, the soldier held a deadly weapon. She heard his voice, harsh and demanding, insisting on what was his to have. And a voice whispered to her through the rain, the words clear in her head: "*You have come far enough and now it is over . . .*" She recognized the voice as her own. The corners of her delicate mouth quivered and shifted upwards in a faint, wry smile. She turned away from the soldier and began to walk rapidly, huddled in the jacket he had given her, anxious to get back to where she belonged . . .

Kelly thought about going after her, bringing her back; or possibly going with her, putting the Army behind him, making a new life among new people in a new place. The rumble of the approaching tanks in-

truded and he turned to listen. When he looked back, the girl was gone.

He slung the carbine and wheeled away. Ahead guns were going off and there were joyous shouts and the sound of men laughing. He increased his pace. Out of the night, some figures materialized, running. He recognized Gutkowski and Little Joe. Crapgame came up behind; all were breathing hard and were agitated.

"Kelly," Little Joe burst out. "Dammit, Kelly! I thought you said *four* Shermans!"

"That's right," Kelly said.

Gutkowski sputtered, bubbles forming at the corner of his mouth, his eyes hot and dangerous. "Didn't you say four Shermans? Didn't you say one million bucks apiece? Have we gotta share it with the whole flaming world? Kelly, we're being *screwed*!"

"What are you talking about?"

Little Joe flung a hand in the direction of the road below. Kelly looked down and saw a string of twinkling blackout lights; Oddball had brought a convoy. Kelly cursed and cursed again.

"Crapgame," he gritted as the little man came puffing up. "You better have a good explanation for this. Now start talking."

Crapgame sidled up to the three men, hands jammed in his pockets, his emotions jumbled. He glanced surreptitiously at Kelly and experienced a twinge of fear; they were gangsters, Kelly had said earlier, gangsters living by gangsters' rules.

"Well?" Kelly said.

From the road, horns could be heard, and a bugle sounded the charge; the Armed Forces Radio was playing Glenn Miller's "In the Mood;" as if in counterpoint, a tracer pattern erupted into the sky, followed by a flare rocket. Kelly stared down at the

road; in the flickering light he was able to see that it was crowded with men and vehicles. With his bony face grim and terrible in the harsh, fading light, he looked at Crapgame again.

Crapgame attempted a smile without success. "You won't believe this," he muttered, "but I think Oddball's brought some friends along . . ."

Oddball loomed out of the hatch of the lead Sherman unshaven and unmartial, a vision to bring tremors to a proper officer at a Saturday morning inspection. He was chewing gum and drinking from a bottle of cognac, even as he glanced at a map and checked its coordinates against the terrain. Oddball still wasn't quite sure where he was.

Behind him followed a line of tanks and half-tracks, a command jeep complete with radio equipment, some buses filled with interested volunteers, a battered truck crowded with forty members of the local communist party along to strike a blow against the fascists, and sixty feet of bridge equipment including a crane riding the back of a cut-down Sherman tank. There was a horse and wagon and a mobile cookhouse, an ambulance, a battery of cannons that were antiques during World War I, some cheerful camp followers offering their wears at cutrate prices, and the gloomy members of a graves registration unit.

Pandemonium was everywhere. There was the cough of the tank engines, the whine of the jeeps and the growl of the trucks, fighting to remain on the slick roadway; the roar of Plymouth V-8's and Fords and G.M.'s; the flat cry of Citroens; the whelp of the Renault two strokes, and the corpulent shriek of the diesel trucks.

The column made it round a bend in the road, a discordant technological chorus spreading across the

countryside. The men of Maitland's company had come to greet a quartet of Shermans; they now stood at roadside silent and subdued, drained of all energy, overwhelmed by this Motley caravan in the night.

Oddball's tank rumbled toward them looming larger and larger. It suddenly seemed to loose its grip on the road and go sliding off the shoulder, scattering the men. The tank shrieked and grew silent. Oddball rose higher in his turret and waved his followers on. He watched the tanks and trucks and half-trucks with their cargo of armed men careen past.

Pleased with what he saw, Oddball climbed out of the turret. He saw Big Joe and Crapgame rushing forward and raised his arms in welcome, grinning in their direction. Big Joe reached, grabbed, and yanked; Oddball went tumbling to the muddy ground. Crapgame swung a booted leg toward his head, missed, and fought to stay erect. Big Joe hauled Oddball to his feet, one huge fist cocked.

"Hey!" Oddball shrieked. "No, Big Joe! You trying to kill me or something!"

"That's the best idea you ever had, creep," Big Joe snarled. "Dead you'd be an improvement."

Crapgame scrambled toward them. "What do you think this is, some kind of a ball game?"

Big Joe's steady fist zeroed in. "Who are these guys?"

Oddball studied the fist with considerable trepidation. "They're friends."

"Where'd you find them?"

"Here and there . . ."

A bus clattered past carrying a load of Frenchmen armed with shotguns. Crapgame moaned.

"Who are those bandits?"

Oddball managed to free himself from Big Joe's grasp. He drew himself up with some measure of dig-

nity. "They're members of the French Resistance movement."

"Look at them!" Crapgame shrieked despairingly. "They're killers, pirates. They'll slaughter us once we get the gold."

Oddball's face took on a beatific smile. "Man, have a little faith. These are beautiful people."

"Oddball," Big Joe said tightly, "you'll be the death of me . . ."

Kelly reached the roadside and assessed the army which had come under his command. A truckload of G.I.'s announced their arrival by discharging their rifles into the air and shouting obscenities at him. His expression never changed. A bugler did a poor imitation of Louis Armstrong playing "Jeepers Creepers." Kelly listened. Another flare exploded in the sky, then began its slow, swinging drop. Kelly didn't move.

A jeep skidded to a stop in front of him and a sergeant leaned out, smelling of wine, his broad face lumpy and threatening. "I'm Bellamy," he began.

"I'm Kelly."

"You're the guy in charge?"

"That's right."

"Then what's the deal with this gold?"

Kelly spoke carefully. "Any guy that makes the town and hits the bank gets an equal share."

Bellamy spit. "That's okay with me. But you cross us, fella, and there'll be trouble."

Kelly ignored the comment. "Where are your officers?"

A sound broke out of Bellamy's throat; it might have been his way of laughing. "They kind've got themselves lost, you understand my meaning?" He slammed the jeep into gear and roared down the road.

Kelly's eyes, slitted and very still, watched it go. A couple of half-tracks went past, then followed the

sixty-foot bridge, along with its very serious engineers. Kelly edged along the road to where Big Joe and the others were crowded like a lynch party around Oddball's tank. When he reached them, Crapgame was shouting at Oddball.

"How do we creep through the enemy with an armored column one flaming mile long!"

"Crapgame," Oddball said patiently, "we got ourselves an army now. We can fight."

A salvo of shells exploded beyond the tree line on the hill. No one commented.

"You call that an army?" Big Joe snarled. "It's a circus."

"They're good boys," Oddball said.

Another cluster of shells landed on the other side of the road.

"Krauts," Little Joe said nervously.

"They're after Oddball's friends," Penn added ominously.

Oddball seemed surprised. "How could they know we're here?"

Kelly stepped forward, confronted the tank commander. "*Listen*, and you'll *know*. Everybody within twenty miles knows you're here, why shouldn't the Germans! You wake up the countryside with that collection of nuts and addicts, those cooks and engineers, those guerillas and gypsies and assorted free-loaders. This is no army, it's a madhouse on wheels . . ."

"Ah, Kelly," Oddball moaned, "you don't understand . . ."

"I think I'm going to crack your dirty neck in my hands," Big Joe said, meaning it.

"Come on," Kelly said. "Let's get going. I want our people at the head of this column. Jones, Ford, Gutkowski, up on that tank and take off like a big bird."

Gutkowski was horrified. "With those cowboys, Kelly?"

Kelly nodded. "There's sixteen million dollars up for grabs and it's not falling into their hands. Mount up!"

"Kelly's right," Big Joe said. "Let's move it!"

"You know, Kelly," Oddball said, "what you said about those people, it isn't nice . . ."

"What?"

"After all, they're my friends . . ."

They all scrambled for the tanks as German shells began to land on the road.

XII

Division Headquarters was located too close to the combat areas to please most staff members and not far enough back to afford them the comforts usually associated with such plum assignments. More, the Division Commander, General Colt, was not a man given to much concern for his personal welfare or safety; this attitude placed his subordinates in certain risk-filled situations that they deemed unpleasant.

For Sergeant Bonsor, General Colt's attitude toward war was eminently satisfactory. Bonsor hated the spit-and-polish of garrison life, hated it even more when it was extended to war zones. He had a very low opinion of such unnecessary accoutrements as clean boots and ties and looked upon saluting as a demeaning gesture for everyone involved.

Bonsor was slouched behind his desk, feet up, boots unlaced, his unshaven face puffy and slack. An unlit cigarette dangled from his mouth and a half-filled cup of coffee stood on the desk. His eyes were closed. The phone rang and he reached for it without enthusiasm.

"Yeah?" he said.

A crisp military voice came over the wire. "Is this General Colt's headquarters?"

"Yeah," Bonsor said.

"This is Supreme Headquarters," the crisp voice said. "The Supreme Commander wants to talk to General Colt."

Bonsor's eyes opened, two streaked orbs slightly unfocused. His feet dropped heavily to the floor.

"Okay, Mac. Hold on a second. I'll see if the General's around."

Carrying the telephone, Bonsor went into the adjoining room. It was dark and still, the air reeked of stale tobacco and dried sweat. A man slept on a cot along one wall.

"General," Bonsor said.

The general stirred. "Beat it."

"Phone for you."

"Bonsor, I'll break you and send you into the line, you don't let me sleep."

"Supreme Headquarters, General."

"What do they want?" General Colt muttered, his voice heavy with sleep but aggressive.

"It's the Old Man, he wants to talk to you."

"Okay," the general said, sitting up. He put on a dressing gown. There were epaulets on the shoulders, three stars on each. He switched on an overhead light, blinking against the glare.

"What's the weather like?" he grumbled.

"Lousy," Bonsor said. "No planes are going to be flying today and your tanks will be stuck in the mud."

"What's the news?" Colt said.

"The news is lousy."

Colt grunted and shoved a cigar into his mouth. Bonsor lit it. Colt puffed and smoke rose around his large, round head. He put the phone to his ear and coughed.

"Yeah," he said.

"The Supreme Commander calling," said the crisp military voice. "Just a moment, sir."

Colt coughed again.

The Old Man came on the wire. There was a friendly vitality in his voice, and admiration. He chuckled. "Colt, I give you credit, I really do. Tell me,

Colt, how do you do it? That's what I want to know, how you do it?"

Colt glared at the telephone and took the cigar out of his mouth. "How do I do what?" he asked, voice guarded.

"That breakthrough," the Old Man said happily. "Let me tell you, Colt, you'll have that fourth star on your shoulders by the end of the week . . ."

Colt looked at the epaulet on his left shoulder, counting the stars pinned to it. He raised his brows questioningly in Bonsor's direction. "What is going on?" he mouthed silently.

"Beats me," Bonsor said.

Colt concentrated on the Old Man who was talking with rising enthusiasm. "Colt, I want you to know that every one of those so-called experts on my staff said it couldn't be done. They told me that Colt's taken on too much this time. They talked about logistical problems, manpower problems, weather problems. Problems. They insisted it was a five-day battle at least. Well, Colt, you've proved every man-jack of them wrong again. You have broken open the frontier all the way up to the Rhine. I tell you, Colt, I think it's absolutely superb, superb, my boy . . ."

Colt was on his feet, reading the battle map hanging on the wall, tracing positions and troop movements. "You say I've broken through?" he said uncertainly.

"I'm proud of you," the Old Man said, laughing that deep satisfied laugh of his. "Proud of you and your boys. I just wanted to call and congratulate you personally, Colt. Well done and all that. Keep those people of yours moving." He hung up.

Colt looked at the dead phone in his hand. Bonsor took it and started out of the room, passing the Division Executive Officer who was on his way in.

Colt put the cigar back in his mouth and sucked. It had gone out. He searched for a match. The Executive Officer offered his lighter.

"Just had a call from the Old Man," General Colt said proudly. "He said we've broken through. I should've been told before this."

The Executive Officer drew his brows together. "We haven't broken through, sir."

"Don't say to me that we haven't broken through!" Colt roared. "The Old Man just told me we *have* broken through. I guess the Old Man would know whether or not we've broken through . . ."

The Executive Officer lifted his shoulders expressively. "We haven't broken through, General."

"Why do you keep saying that we haven't broken through? What kind of a thing is that to say?" Colt rolled the cigar around his mouth, sucking noisily.

"There's nothing in the reports, sir," the Executive Officer said. "Only intercepted signals from the enemy. They do indicate an American armored thrust on their right flank which has overrun sixteen villages . . ."

"Somebody's holding out on me!" Colt bellowed. He snatched at the cigar. "Goddamn thing's gone out."

The Executive Officer lit his lighter.

Another officer, a stiff, slender man who held himself as if his neck was too delicate to risk turning his head in either direction appeared in the doorway. He wore a single star on each shoulder.

"Sir," he began.

"Jack," Colt said.

"Sir."

"Who's done it, Jack? Who's gone through?"

"No one has, sir. We've found a hole in the right flank and I've pushed the 92nd into it. That's all."

A Signal Corps major presented himself, saluting

snappily. Colt waved his cigar at the man, turned back to the One-Star General.

"What do you mean, Jack, you're pushing them through? Tell me what that means, Jack? Have they overrun sixteen villages?"

"Well, no, sir."

Colt pointed the cigar at the Signal Corps major. "What have you got?"

The major cleared his throat. "We've been intercepting signals, general. There seems to be some sort of an action going on at the bridge near Digne."

"But that's thirty miles beyond our front," the One-Star General said. "It can't be."

"What do you mean, some sort of an action?" Colt demanded.

The Signal Corps major looked around helplessly.

Captain Maitland appeared in the doorway, his face clean and recently barbered, his uniform sleek and pressed. He carried a number of expensively-wrapped packages in his arms. He smiled cheerfully.

"*Good* morning, sir," he began. "I'm straight back from Paris, general, and I'm here to say I was able to buy *everything* you asked me to get . . ." He moved deeper into the dank room.

General Colt swept past him, cigar held high. "I want to know who the hell's broken through!"

Maitland held himself very still, aware that he'd arrived at a very sensitive moment, militarily speaking, that is.

"You!" Colt shouted at the Signal Corps major. "You must know *something*!"

The major began to stammer. "They're not . . . lowing any normals . . . normal . . . procedure. Thedure. The-they-they're using some k-kind of code."

Colt put on his steel helmet. "Code! What code is that? Come on, man, get it out!"

The major swallowed hard. Well, general, there's codewords like *bankheist* and *Crapgame* and *Little Joe* and *Big Joe*. Words like that. My people are trying to crack it now. Give us a few hours and—"

Captain Maitland dropped the parcels he was carrying. No one noticed. General Colt, steel helmet jiggling on his great round head, strapping his pistol belts over the dressing gown he still wore, charged out of the door, trailed by his officers. Captain Maitland, pale, quivering, his eyes dreamlike, found it impossible to move.

XIII

General Colt broke out of his headquarters, the dressing gown flapping around his long legs as he strode across the damp grass. The Signal Corps major caught up with him.

"Sir . . ."

"I want to hear what's coming over your radio, major," Colt gritted out.

"It's difficult to hear them, general. They're operating on 300s, sir, and there's always bad reception at this hour of the day. It's the ionosphere, sir."

"I want to hear them," Colt said grimly. He led the way into the signal truck, stood glowering down at the radiomen at their sets.

"See what you can pick up," the major said.

The radiomen fiddled with their dials and knobs, honing in on the right wavelength, trying to bring up the voices in English and eliminate those that spoke German.

"There's an awful lot of static," one of the radiomen said.

"An awful lot of static," the major concurred.

"That's gunfire, you damned fool," Colt exploded. "Machine gun fire and tank guns. What the hell is happening?" He leaned closer.

A voice came through with increasing clarity. Captain Maitland, who had trailed quietly, carefully, into the signal truck, recognized it as belonging to Big Joe. He tried to keep from fainting.

"Can somebody get rid of that machine gun for me?" Big Joe asked in a metallic voice. "Any offers?"

"Get that damned machine gun," Colt commanded thinly.

Static returned.

"Bellamy!" came Crapgame's voice. "To the right, blow in there, man!"

"Go, go," Colt shouted.

There was more static.

"Fix the goddamned radio!" Colt bellowed.

At once Kelly's voice came across loud and clear. "This is Kelly for Little Joe. Look, we're pinned down on the far side of the bridge . . ."

Captain Maitland put his hand against the wall of the signal truck. There could be no question now; those were *his* men, his company that was fighting. But where? And *why*? He came erect at the distinctive sound of Big Joe's heavy voice.

"Is somebody gonna take that machine gun ahead or do I have to go up there and strangle the sonuvabitch with my own two hands?"

Crapgame's voice came over the radio next. "Hey, Kelly, Crapgame for Kelly. What the hell is going on?"

"Kelly to Crapgame. We're across the river with Oddball but the bridge is blown. You and the rest of the men make your way over and join up with us."

"Crapgame, Roger. I'd like some covering fire, if you don't mind."

"Kelly to Crapgame. Give you what I can. Come on over."

"Go on, man," General Colt urged throatily. "Go on over, don't wait . . ."

The bridge was an unholy mess. Shells exploded everywhere and machine gun fire crisscrossed all open territory. Two tanks burned fiercely and there was a half-track turned on its side, smoking. Little Joe and

some of the men crouched behind a third tank. Crapgame leaped down from the turret. The wily face was set, the eyes alert, and there was no sense of deviousness about him now. He pointed swiftly.

"You two men cover us from here, the rest of you, go fast across the bridge."

One by one the men took off, rushing for the bridge. As Crapgame sent them out, Bellamy appeared with two of his men. They were angry.

"What the hell is this all about?" Bellamy demanded.

"We're crossing the river," Crapgame said. He sent two more men out.

"The hell you are!"

Crapgame indicated the man carrying a field telephone. "Kelly's in trouble over there and you guys are doing nothing to get him out. So we'll do it."

"We can't get our trucks across. There's a hole in that bridge thirty feet wide."

"You've got bridging equipment," Crapgame snarled.

"It's jammed up at the rear."

"Well, get it the hell unjammed then."

Crapgame turned to leave and Bellamy reached out to stop him. The little supply sergeant whirled around, carbine coming up, mouth pulled back to show his poorly-fitted teeth. He bit off the words. "Here!" He shoved the field phone at Bellamy. "Don't talk to me, talk to Kelly. I'm going!"

Bent low, Crapgame ran for the bridge.

General Colt hovered closer to the radiomen, listening hard, caught up in the sounds of the battle.

"Turn up the sound," he ordered.

"Who are those guys?" the One-Star General wanted to know.

"What the hell difference does it make?" Colt said. "They're Americans, *my* boys. Listen to them, these are guys who want to go forward . . ."

Bellamy's harsh voice came over the radio. "This is Bellamy for Kelly. Kelly, we can't use that stinkin' bridge. The stinkin' Krauts blew a hole in it after you got across. We can't ford the river either, the bed's too soft. So what do we do?"

"Kelly to Bellamy. What about the bridging equipment?"

"Bellamy to Kelly. That's a five-hour operation. Can you hold on for five hours?"

"To hell with that! We're continuing the advance. You catch up with us, if you can."

General Colt straightened up, face aglow. He surveyed the members of his staff. "That's what I like to hear—attack, attack, attack. That's fighting spirit!"

Bellamy's voice came back on the radio, laced with fury. "We're in this together, Kelly. You can't go on alone."

Kelly answered: "I can't hang around here for five hours. You remember the orders, we go through anything and everything, nothing gets in the way, *nothing*. And we stop for no one."

General Colt slammed his hands together in excitement. "Dammit, *that's* the way! That's a man—a *soldier!* If that guy's a major, I'll promote him to colonel."

The radio crackled and a new voice sounded. "Graves Registration to Kelly. Listen, fella, we all got a stake in this advance. You made a deal with us."

"I tell you, that's enthusiasm!" Colt cried happily. "Even the grave diggers are in there."

"Kelly to Graves Registration. The deal was plain: anyone who makes the town and hits the bank shares in the jackpot. Couldn't be clearer."

The Signal Corps major shook his head and tried to think. "I thought I knew every code in the book but this one beats me."

"By *God*!" General Colt roared, "those are fighting men out there! Men doing a dirty job for their country, their flag, for the folks back home. Makes a man proud to be an American . . ."

The tank squatted behind a protective parapet on the far side of the bridge like a weary beetle. Kelly sat behind the turret, holding the radio-phone to his ear, trying to close out the sounds of the battle. Inside the tank, Oddball fired a burst on the machine gun.

Kelly shouted down the hatch. "To the right, Oddball. They're trying to move up."

The machine gun traversed slowly, began to chatter. "Got 'em!" Oddball cried.

Bellamy's voice came over the radio. "Kelly, you're crazy!" You can't make it on your own. You haven't got enough men."

Kelly spoke into the set. "0600 hours at the gates of the town. Be there, Bellamy, or you're out."

He started to stack the phone back in its case when Bellamy's voice came screaming out of the earpiece.

"Kelly, Kelly! Hold up for one hour, *one hour*. We're setting up the bridging equipment. Hold on, Kelly."

"Negative," Kelly said into the phone, and hung up. He looked back at the bridge. Crapgame, Little Joe and the last of the men of Maitland's company came leaping from girder to girder, swarming ashore, running for the tank, flinging themselves aboard. Kelly banged hard on the hatch. "Let's go!" he shouted. "Get this show on the road!"

The Sherman lurched forward, heading deeper into enemy territory.

Sergeant Bonsor brought General Colt his battle jacket. It gleamed with polished stars and insignia, was splashed with the color of Army patches and division emblems, with stripes and chevrons. His breast was a spectrum of battle ribbons and decorations, of stars and clusters, of paratrooper wings and a combat infantryman's badge, of specific and general commendations from a variety of governments marking a variety of wars, police actions, punitive expeditions, and sundry skirmishes and firefights in far corners of the globe.

The general buttoned the jacket and snapped on his pistols, draped his binocular case around his neck, reached for his map case, then slammed his helmet back on his head, buckling it into place. Bonsor handed him his favorite pair of Air Force sunglasses. The general felt ready. He slapped his map case against his thigh and looked around.

"Jack," he said to the One-Star General, "I want every man in Castle's division on the road within the hour. He's going to be in Digne by dawn."

"Yes sir."

"And tell him I'm going personally to Digne right now. Maitland, you get my driver around here."

Captain Maitland swallowed. It was a painful process. "But, sir, Digne is behind enemy lines."

"Maitland, let me tell you something. Those men, those fighting Yanks are out there and I am going to Digne. Behind enemy lines, you say, well it better not be behind enemy lines by the time I get there. Bonsor, give me some medals. I'm going to decorate every soldier in that penetration, whoever they are. They've saved the reputation of this whole army, I kid you not."

Bonsor rummaged through a bureau drawer and

came up with a handful of medals and ribbons. Colt took them, gazed haughtily around the room.

"You guys," he said, "are meant to be fighting this battle and you don't even know where it is. Well, I am going to tell you where it is, it's forty miles past where you thought it was. Is that clear to you? All right, now let's get my army back into this war." He strode proudly toward the door.

"General," Bonsor called, going after him. "You forgot your trousers . . ."

XIV

Dawn broke to the front and seemed to reach out for the advancing tank as it rolled alone through the vineyard country. The clank and squeak of the heavy treads were accented by the chirp of birds and the cawing of an occasional crow. As the sun rose, it grew warmer and the men on the shell of the tank straightened up and stretched, began to talk to each other, to joke, even to laugh.

Oddball climbed out of the hatch grinning, moving toward the back of the tank where a twenty-foot-long aerial whipped around as the Sherman seesawed and fish-tailed. With a flourish, he hoisted a huge American flag to the top of the aerial.

"Hey, Oddball!" Crapgame guffawed, "that belongs on a battleship!"

"It's big enough."

"That's what we are, men, a battleship on land, and we're all gonna be rich sailors!"

A chorus of laughter went up.

"We really showed Bellamy and that fruitcake army of his . . ."

"With him out, there's more for the rest of us."

Oddball looked back in the direction from which they had come. His face closed up, his eyes jittery. "That Bellamy, he'll find a way to catch up. He's a hungry man . . ."

The laughter subsided and the men kept from looking at one another.

Daylight spread across the bridge and Bellamy's

men gave every indication of wanting to conceal themselves from the revealing rays of the new sun. They appeared to be suffering from hideous hangovers, their cheeks hollow, their eyes withdrawn and haunted, their mouths drawn and embittered.

Everywhere broken and burning vehicles. Tanks smoldering and trucks overturned, half-tracks gutted, jeeps destroyed. Smoke rose and the stench of spilled fuel carried on the breeze. Men huddled over their guns, hands clawing the triggers, but there were no more targets at which to shoot.

Up the hill, running back from the bridge, the parked trucks of the bridge unit and behind them the remains of Bellamy's private fighting arm. Their leader stood in the roadway confronting the bridge, two of his lieutenants flanking him. On the bridge itself, a noncom engineer walked searchingly across the rebuilt sections, testing the flooring. Apparently content, he turned back and made his way to where Bellamy waited.

"Well," Bellamy said impatiently. "What's the verdict?"

The engineer shrugged. "It's okay. You can go now. It's as good as it's gonna get. Not as good as new, but good enough."

"It'll hold the equipment?"

"Yeah."

An exultant sound dribbled out of Bellamy. "Well, *okay!* Let's get moving. I want to catch up with that Kelly, let him know he can't pull a fast one on me. Let's move it! You want to let those guys keep all the gold!"

With a warlike shout of approval, Bellamy's men ran for the trucks; moments later they rolled onto the road, formed into line. From his place near the bridge

entrance, Bellamy waved them on. Gears ground as the lead driver shifted downward, aiming carefully at the opening, fearful of sliding off the narrow approach, still wet and muddy from the rains.

But before the truck reached the bridge, the scream of a siren and the blare of warning klaxons split the air. Bellamy felt a nervous contraction across his stomach and he peered anxiously past his trucks to where the road bent out of sight.

A jeep careened into sight, siren clearing the way, speeding directly toward the bridge. Bellamy waved frantically for his drivers to stop.

The jeep came on, followed by a convoy. Bellamy's eyes widened. The lead vehicle flew the pennant of a three-star general. It occurred to Bellamy that of all the people in the world he didn't want to see, a three-star general probably ranked among the first three. He shuddered, squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, the jeep was skidding to a stop only a few feet away and standing in the seat next to the driver was a three-star general. *The* three-star general, Bellamy told himself; General Colt, with all his medals and ribbons and awards and gleaming pistols and shining stars. Bellamy groaned and tried to remember how to stand at attention.

"Which one of you guys is Bellamy?" General Colt cried in a voice that brooked no hesitation.

Bellamy cursed his bad luck and took two strides forward, bringing his heels together in what he hoped would be a smart click; the mud on his boots muffled the sound. He got off a salute.

"Sir."

The general returned the salute and Bellamy let his hand drop, slumped into a more natural stance.

Captain Maitland, pleased to see that none of his

own company was around, felt impelled to make his presence known. "Straighten up, soldier, when the General speaks to you."

Bellamy pulled his shoulders back, sucked his belly in, pushed his butt down, and flattened his hands along his sides. "Yes, *sir*." He watched the general climb out of the jeep, all that brass jingling, glinting in the morning sun. *How the Mother-lovin'-hell did Colt find out what they were up to?* How did they locate them, get here so damned fast? *Kelly!* It must have been that bastard Kelly, turning the brass onto him and the boys . . .

Colt advanced across the space that separated them. He reached out and pinned a medal on Bellamy's chest. "Soldiers like you make America proud, Bellamy," he bit off. He beckoned to the engineer and another G.I. standing nearby, pinned decorations to their uniforms. "Keep up the good work, men. Fight the good fight. Freedom depends on patriots like you and me. Stand on the ramparts and give 'em hell!" General Colt did a crisp about face and marched back to the jeep, climbed back in, put his hand to his helmet in a crisp salute and held it as the jeep drove off, the long convoy trailing behind.

Bellamy watched them speed across the newly repaired bridge, then looked down at the piece of metal hanging on his shirtfront. "Oh, damn," he said. "Damn. That lousy general's ruined it all. He spoiled the caper." He collapsed at the edge of the road, tears streaming down his filthy cheeks, cursing Kelly, the army and all generals.

General Colt didn't sit down until the jeep had reached the far side of the bridge. He clapped his hands in exhilaration. "Did you see that!" he crowed. "That's what happens when a brave kid like that gets some recognition of his service to his country. He

didn't expect anything and he's overcome. *Overcome.* Tears from a big tough kid like that. Really grabs a guy. Those are the sort of men who win wars, Captain Maitland, and don't you ever forget it."

"I won't ever forget it, General."

"I don't mind telling you, gentlemen, I am proud today. Proud, proud, proud."

Captain Maitland looked around at the passing countryside. It occurred to him that they were in hostile terrain.

"General Colt, don't you think, sir, that it might be a good idea for you to wait for your Army to catch up with you? This is enemy territory, sir."

Colt chuckled smugly. "Appreciate your concern for my welfare, Maitland, but history waits for no one. We have an appointment in Clarement, Maitland. An appointment with destiny . . ."

XV

Oddball's tank raced ahead; for one small moment the Sherman and its motley crew were the vanguard of the Allied armies in Europe. The tank cut across fields past farmers working their crops, rumbled through the grounds of a convent, accepting the good wishes of the nuns in their black habits, over the cobble-stoned streets of towns whose inhabitants were anxious and ready to welcome their liberators.

"Hey," Crapgame yelled, as they rolled through streets lined with stone houses. "Where'd they get the American flags?"

"Been saving 'em from the first war," Little Joe told him.

"There's that about the French," Gutkowski said. "For them peace is just the time between one war and the next."

An old man drinking his morning coffee in a street café, came to his feet and raised his cup in salute. The men on the tank rained cigarettes and candy down on him.

"How far to Clarement?" one of the men shouted.

It was Kelly who answered. "When the guns start going off, you'll know you're there."

The men of Maitland's company lapsed into silence.

Claremont was a village of medium size, spreading out across the landscape from a central square. The streets were narrow and the walks even narrower. Built for horses and wagons hundreds of years before, they were streets hazardous to motor cars and drivers

alike. Behind the town, toward the west, were low hills and the town had climbed the gentle slopes as it grew. To the north of the central square, the steeple of an old church stretched skyward, beyond it was a long, low building that looked like a school. Otherwise, there was a sameness to the houses of Claremont; two story affairs with thick walls built of stone or cement, painted yellow or green, with many of the roofs made of clay-colored tile.

It was early in the morning, not yet six o'clock, and most of Claremont still slept. But in the central square men and machines stirred.

An S.S. officer stood at attention in the middle of the square, every inch a crisp military man, supervising the placement of three immense Tiger tanks. Their high-pitched motors whined as they maneuvered for defensive positions in the square, the limited space making them seem slow and clumsy. Satisfied, the Panzer Leader made a commanding gesture and the tank drivers cut their engines. The town grew quiet.

The officer marched from one tank to the next, indicating fields of fire for each of them, issuing orders in his very cultured German. This done, he paraded across the square to a small provincial building that had been designed in the grand manner of the French Empire. Up a few low steps, past four fluted pillars, to am imposing pair of oversized doors, powerful and reassuring, a proper safeguard for any fortune. A Palladian roof capped it all.

A German soldier patrolled the front of the building. He snapped to attention when the officer approached. They exchanged crisp salutes.

The Panzer Leader looked up. At either end of the bank roof, machine gunners stood ready at their

weapons. The officer's eyes swept the approaches to the square.

"Everything is in order?" he snapped out.

"All is as it should be, Herr Oberleutenant."

"Good."

The officer entered the street adjoining the bank. Here were parked a dozen trucks. Mechanics labored industriously, replacing tires, attending to the motors, recharging batteries.

"Will it take much longer, Sergeant?" the officer barked.

A tall man with yellow hair came to attention. "We are working as fast as is possible, Herr Oberleutenant. Some of the truck engines were in very bad condition."

"Do your best, but be quick about it."

The officer marched away, not seeing the expression of disgust that passed across the sergeant's face. The Panzer Leader checked the time, then strolled easily across the square toward the Tigers. Seeing them provided him with a safe, pleasant feeling; all that power was *his* to command. He had long ago decided that the Tigers symbolized for him all the authority of the Third Reich and its eventual triumph over all its enemies.

The Sherman lay hidden deep within the foliage of some young trees, back on the hillside. In front of the tank, and along one side, the men brewed some coffee and nibbled at K rations without interest. Some of them sprawled out on the ground and tried to sleep, while others just stared sightlessly ahead.

Kelly crouched next to a tree and peered down at Claremont through field glasses. He watched the Panzer Leader make his inspection, watched him place the

Tigers, counted the men and vehicles in the town. He lowered the glasses and considered what he had seen.

Behind him, Big Joe reached for the glasses and took a long, slow look at Claremont. He grunted softly.

"Three Tigers," he said, visibly impressed.

"They couldn't have made it easier," Kelly said, not turning.

"There's three Tigers in that town, Kelly," Big Joe said again.

Kelly offered no response, conscious of Oddball listening a few strides away. He heard Oddball move his feet and wet his lips. He waited.

"Kelly," Oddball began.

"Yeah?"

"You can't expect me to take my Sherman into that place . . ."

"That's exactly what I do expect, Oddball. That's why we came, to go into that town."

"*Three* Tigers. I'm not taking on three Tigers with just one Sherman. It's insane . . ."

"That's what I keep telling him," Big Joe said.

Kelly said, "The only foot soldiers they got are around the bank."

"Man," Oddball said, voice rising. "I won't be fighting foot soldiers. I'll be taking on the Tigers."

Kelly stood up, lean and straight, very calm and almost cocky. "All we gotta do is draw the Tigers away from the square. The rest is up to Big Joe."

"Kelly, after Normandy, in open country we got slaughtered by Tigers—"

". . . That's what I keep telling him," Big Joe said.

"Listen to me," Kelly said in a thin, tight voice. "The Tiger *is* an open country tank. And we have here an old town with narrow streets. Add to that, the

element of surprise. The element of surprise is very important in a battle."

Big Joe almost choked. "Surprise! You talk like we're gonna hit a elephant with a shillelagh." He jerked his thumb in Oddball's direction. "He doesn't have a shell that will pierce a Tiger's skin, you know that."

Kelly looked squarely at Oddball. "I know this—the Tiger's got two weaknesses. The traverse of its gun and its ass. We got to hit it at point blank range—and pour it in from the rear."

Oddball swore, turned back toward the Sherman, then swung around again, an oddly graceful maneuver. "If you're so flamin' sure, Kelly, why don't you put your butt into that turret and do the job yourself?"

Kelly gazed steadily at him. "No, Oddball. You are going to be sitting in there. I am going to be sitting *outside* telling you exactly what to do."

No one spoke. Oddball lowered his head, his brain turning swiftly as he struggled to weigh all the elements, to make a decision. His own decision.

Crapgame joined them, grinning without humor. "Hey, Oddball, your hour of glory is upon you and you don't seem so interested."

Oddball backed away. "Shut up."

"Let me tell you about the gold bar, Oddball. It is measured in Troy weight and has a value of—"

"Shut up, I told you!"

From his place near the Sherman, little Joe joined in. "Come on, Oddball, be a hero."

Oddball snorted in disgust. "To a New York Italian, a hero is some kind of a sandwich, right?"

"Right," Little Joe grinned.

"—Not some nut who takes on a triple in Tigers. Do you think I'm some kind of a nut or something?"

He edged closer to the tank, to his crew who watched him with wary interest. He faced the crewmen. "Are we nuts?" he shouted.

They sat there with the frizzy hair, their iron crosses, their cavalry breeches and riding boots, their leather jerkins, scratching and grinning, and answered in chorus: "No!"

Oddball jerked around to face Kelly, face tortured and desperate, breathing hard. "You see, Kelly, you *see!*"

"Mount up!" Kelly said softly. "We're going in . . . Now!"

XVI

The five Chrysler engines of Oddball's Sherman roared into life with shattering suddenness. Dew beaded the sides of the tank and exhaust fumes hung over the humped monster like a cloud of doom. Oddball and his crew settled into the tank's three hatches, adjusted themselves in place. Crapgame scurried over the tank, tossing aside branches of pine which had served as camouflage. Kelly rubbed his hands against the morning chill and untied the leather sock that protected the muzzle of the tank's big gun. As if in response, it elevated, traversed from left to right and back again.

Kelly checked his watch, gestured toward Cowboy and Ford. They clambered aboard the Sherman, located themselves atop the engines, discovering some comfort in the rising heat that came through the armor plate. Kelly took his place next to the turret, nodded at Oddball, who relayed all orders to the driver.

"Let's go," Kelly said.

Oddball grimaced. "You figure Big Joe, Crapgame and the others have time enough to get where they have to go?"

"They better." Kelly grinned. "Big Joe'll be there."

Oddball grunted and signaled the driver. The tank groaned and lurched ahead. Cowboy and Ford waved unhappily at the remaining members of Maitland's company as the tank bulled its way through the pine trees and onto the gravel of a forest path like some

uncertain, groggy bear emerging after a winter's hibernation.

The sun was higher as the tank shook and rattled on the road toward Claremont, a pale onion of light that provided little warmth. Cowboy and Ford huddled over the engines, clutching their weapons, miserable and cold. They displayed no interest in where they were, or where they were going, men seemingly resigned to whatever end fate had chosen for them.

Next to Oddball on the turret, Kelly kept searching the landscape on both sides for any sign of enemy movements; he knew what to expect. The tank clattered around a bend in the road and ahead were the gates of the town. Two German soldiers stood guard, nervously clutching at their rifles. They eyed the oncoming tank with alarm and one of them disappeared into the guardhouse. Moments later he was back with a corporal who laughed and said something to the two guards that made them laugh. Then, lazily, with no concern, the corporal lifted his binoculars and examined the approaching vehicle. He almost dropped the glasses.

"AMERIKANISCHE!" he shouted.

The three men ran for the guardhouse. As they disappeared inside, Little Joe came out of the ditch at roadside and went after them. Inside, Big Joe and Gutkowski had rendered two of the soldiers unconscious, were working the third over with swift efficiency. Little Joe helped to bundle the still bodies into a cupboard. The sound of the Sherman smashing the wooden guard barriers caused the men to work faster, then hurry back outside. No one answered the guard's telephone when it began to ring.

Cowboy and Ford darted along the main street of Claremont, checking windows and doorways. Twenty feet behind, came the Sherman, Kelly scan-

ning the rooftops, carbine cradled loosely in one arm. In the early morning stillness, the roar of the tank's engines and the clatter of its heavy treads on the cobblestones could be heard everywhere in the little French village.

In the village square, the Panzer leader sat securely on the turret of one Tiger listening. It was impossible, yet the sounds were those of a tank. *But what tank?* The only tanks in Clarement were his own. His eyes went from one to another, admiring the 110-milimeter cannon that projected a full ten feet beyond the bodies of the Tigers. Whatever it was, tank or some lesser vehicle, it would have a short life when it came under these guns. At once, the Panzer leader straightened up, his precise features stiff and cold; the clatter had ceased. He strained to hear. But there was nothing, nothing but a suddenly oppressive silence.

In that silence, Big Joe led his men across a stretch of broken ground at the edge of the village. They advanced quickly, quietly, in scattered groups, with chopped strides, veering for each piece of cover. They were like a professional fighting machine, all its parts polished and tested in the field, an infantry company. Now you see them, now you don't. They went around chicken coops and through the garbage dump; through a potter's yard and past a school; over fences and under stone bridges; through culverts centuries old. A face appeared at a window; fear turned quickly to recognition, pleasure, then pulled back behind closed shutters. A dog barked and a cockerel cried. Eyes watched from behind drawn curtains and a young mother drew her two children into the basement. There was only the silence and the muffled, hurried scrape of their rubber-soled boots, and the harshness of their quickened breathing.

Big Joe led them around a corner and into a narrow

street, turning into still another one. Abruptly they pulled up. Gutkowski went to his knee and leveled his carbine; the commander of the Tigers floated delicately on his front sight. Big Joe's hand came down heavily on the carbine. Gutkowski looked at him, recognized the threatening glint in the sergeant's eyes. He stood up. Big Joe turned away. He spotted Crapgame, crouched over, having difficulty in breathing, out of condition for this kind of work, but trying. Past him, at a corner, Babra, Fortune and Fisher. Big Joe raised his hand, held up two fingers. Babra and Fortune launched themselves low and fast toward an alley that led to the back of the bank. In pairs, the remaining men went after them.

In the square, the Panzer leader was uneasy. The silence was disturbing. *He had heard a tank* . . . or had he? He snapped orders to the commander of one of the Tigers and he fired his motors. On signal, the Tiger rumbled slowly across the square and into a street leading toward the gates of the town, its monstrous bulk blocking off the passageway.

The Tiger prowled on a slow search, picking its way carefully, too large and cumbersome in the cramped and ancient streets to swing around the sharp, blind corners. The commander spoke to the Panzer leader on his radio.

"There is nothing," he reported. "I have found nothing. But the front gate has been broken . . ."

"Keep looking."

"Yes, Oberleutenant!"

The noise of the Tiger advanced before it, causing dishes to rattle in the houses. Somewhere a man cursed; elsewhere a child began to cry. In an alley, Kelly, Oddball and the crew of the Sherman waited with a rising tension and anticipation, listening as the Tiger came closer.

Kelly, half out of the turret, seemed frozen into place, his weapon ready, fixed on the cross-street ten yards to their front. Oddball's voice floated up to him.

"It sounds close, Kelly . . ."

"Very close. Take it on your own!"

Oddball made no reply.

Suddenly, the long gun of the Tiger appeared at the end of the alley and then the black squat body of the tank itself filled Oddball's gunsights. At point blank range, he fired.

The high explosive charge slammed into the turret traverse ring, covering it in smoke, sparking an enormous blue flash, jamming the mechanism so that it became impossible for the Tiger to shoot back.

Kelly swung the carbine to his shoulder. The smoke lessened and the commander of the Tiger appeared. Kelly cut him down with two bellyshots. The head of the gunner popped out of the hatch; Kelly put a slug through his throat. He fell across the smoking torso of the Tiger, blood spurting.

Oddball rose out of the hatch to see. "Jesus!" he breathed. "So damned quick. Only a few seconds." There was admiration in his voice.

Kelly pushed him back inside the tank and slammed the heavy lid back down. The early morning silence returned to Claremont.

Kelly listened hard . . .

A low wall shielded Big Joe and Little Joe, yet allowed them to look into the central square, to watch the pair of Tigers poised there. They listened as the Panzer leader shouted to the commander of the remaining tank.

"That *was* a tank cannon, yes!"

"I believe so, Herr Oberleutenant."

"But not the cannon of the Tiger?"

"I agree, Herr Oberleutenant."

"What then? There are no other tanks in the village."

"Is it possible that the Americans have reached us?"

"No!" the Panzer leader insisted. "Such a thing is not possible. I would have been informed. There are procedures in every eventuality and they must be followed . . ." He glared across the square and tried to penetrate the silence.

Jonesy padded along a back street until he came to the house with the French windows. He put his thick shoulders down and shoved, went hurtling into a genteel living room like the fullback he had been. He headed for the stairs when he heard something, whirled around M-1 level. Next to a tall, intricately carved armoire stood a Royal Air Force officer, complete with a white silk scarf and a thick red mustache. He put his hand out with all the aplomb of a Rolls Royce salesman.

"Who the hell are you!" Jonesy said automatically.

"A British pilot, old man. Been living in this cupboard for fourteen months or so, friend of the family, you might say." He giggled. "My compliments, jolly good show by you and your chums."

Jonesy lowered his rifle. "Yeah," he said, nonplussed. Then he remembered why he was here. "You stay right where you are, see. It's liable to get pretty hot around here in a few minutes."

The airman leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "Whatever you say, old man. This is an American show, what!"

Jonesy pounded up the stairs.

The girl was very pretty and naked under a flimsy robe, her face still closed with sleep, her eyes lidded as she studied herself in the mirror on the closet door. She rearranged her hair, tried it another way, decided the first style was best. A movement in the glass

caught her eye and she stared. Two men were climbing into her bedroom through the window, two soldiers, huge and dirty, laden down with ammunition belts and weapons. She turned, ready to scream, but before any sound could come out the first soldier reached her, his big, hairy hand covering her mouth. She struggled to free herself, but was helpless in his grasp.

He grinned down at her, a wide, leering show of long teeth and his breath smelled sour. She heard the second soldier speak and though she didn't understand what was being said, recognized the language as English.

"Come on, Gutkowski," Penn said. "Let the girl alone. We got a job to do."

"She's a beaut. You know what I'd like to do?"

"I know. But there isn't time now. We blow this and Kelly'll kill us both."

"Screw Kelly," Gutkowski said, pushing the girl backwards onto the bed.

Penn looked at the girl and raised a cautioning finger to his mouth. "Be quiet. *Fermez.*"

She nodded quickly and didn't move until they had unlatched the door and gone out, until she heard them pounding down the stairs that led to the kitchen.

The girl's grandfather was very old and his hearing was faulty. He sat at the massive wooden table and spread mustard on his big Jambon sandwich, carefully salted it. Nodding contentedly, he raised the sandwich to his mouth. It was then that the two soldiers materialized in front of him. He stared at them curiously but unafraid.

"Americains?"

"That's right, pop," Gutkowski said. He snatched the sandwich out of the old man's hands and marched out of the kitchen.

Penn shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "*Merci*," he said.

"*Avec plaisir*," the old man croaked. "*Bon appetit* . . ."

In the square the Panzer leader barked out a curt order in German. The two Tigers roared to life and hatches were slammed shut. Lumbering in opposite directions, the Tigers rolled toward the corners of the square.

Behind the low wall, Big Joe made ready to move. "This is it, Little Joe. You know what you got to do, do it!"

"Right."

The two men separated, running fast.

Jonesy hurried to the edge of the roof. Here it sloped down sharply. He filled his lungs with air and began the treacherous descent. At the corner, he found a drainage gutter and locked his foot into it. He waited for his heart to stop pounding before sneaking a look over the narrow parapet. Below, he could see the German machine gunner on the roof of the bank. He ducked back and checked his carbine.

In the sacristy of the Church, the balding priest was donning his robes, making ready for the Mass. A young boy helped him with neither comment nor interest. The process was halted when Little Joe appeared in the window, pulled himself inside.

"Excuse me, Father," Little Joe said. "*Je suis Catholique*." He smiled at the young boy who smiled back. "But I gotta do a job . . ."

The priest pressed his hands together. "I have been wondering," he said in accented English, "when the Americans would come and now you are here. God has blessed us."

Little Joe made the Sign of the Cross hurriedly.

"Father, I got no time right now. How do I get up to the roof of the church?"

The priest gestured toward the boy. "Jean-Paul will show you. There is going to be shooting?"

"Make book on it, Father . . ."

"I will pray for you, my son, for all men."

"Father, you do that." Little Joe looked at the boy. "The roof, kid . . ."

Jean-Paul led him through the church to a stairway, started up. "No," Little Joe said. "Go back. This is for real."

On the roof, Little Joe took up a position near the bell tower, watching the great iron bell warily.

Crapgame charged up one street and down another, his movements uncoordinated, his short legs pumping fast but covering little ground. He skidded around a corner, feet shuffling for purchase on the still dewy-damp cobblestones, went crashing to a sliding halt into five garbage cans. He fell back exhausted and disgusted amidst the refuse, too weary to complain. Then, as if designed to torment him further, he spied the dislodged lid of one garbage can beginning to roll with a tinny sound down the slight incline toward the square. Horrified, he watched it go until it fell with a wobbly noise that wouldn't quit. He pulled his submachine gun into position and waited for some greater disaster to overtake him.

The bell in the church steeple began to peel, a slow funereal tolling that reverberated through the ancient streets.

The Tigers, in crackling radio contact with each other, made their separate ways through the town, pressing their search for the intruder. Whatever was wrong, the Tankmen intended to put right. They were tough and trained technicians at the controls of

the finest product of German engineering genius and skill, fighting men in a fighting machine. Their triumph was inevitable . . .

Big Joe put his hand on the doorknob, leaned his massive shoulder against the panel, and pushed. Inside the house, he heard voices and he moved cautiously along a carpeted hallway in the direction of the sound. He found a family at breakfast. Two children stood in front of the fireplace, being dressed by their mother; another one, a young boy, stood naked in a tin bath, staring with wide brown eyes at the armed intruder. The father rose from his place at the table, alarm showing on his face.

"No need to be afraid, folks," Big Joe said. His attempt at a smile produced a grimace that frightened the mother. She drew her three children to her.

Big Joe swore. There was no time to try and make himself understood. "*Le cellier?*" he managed.

"*Ah, oui,*" the father said. He pointed to a trap door. "*Ici.*"

Big Joe pulled it up and gestured for the father to get his family below. The man took the two older children and obeyed. The mother, her youngest son in her arms, hesitated.

"*Vite!*" Big Joe snapped. "*Vite!*"

Big Joe picked up the clothes belonging to the infant and dropped them into the cellar. "What the hell's the matter with you people!" he said, with some annoyance. "You want that kid to catch pneumonia or something!"

He let the trap fall back into place and picked up a cup of coffee from the table. It was still hot and quite strong, the way he liked it. Carrying the cup, he crossed to the window. Pulling the curtains aside, he looked out into the square. The house was situated right beside the bank; less than twenty yards away,

two German sentries stood guard. Big Joe watched them and sipped the coffee.

The church bell continued to toll.

In an alley, Cowboy pressed against a wall, listening to the eerie squeals of a Tiger sliding along a street to his rear. He held tightly to his rifle.

In another street, Ford flattened himself into a doorway as a Tiger passed the open end. When it passed, he heaved a sigh of relief.

The Sherman rested under an old fountain. Kelly heard the clatter of the Tigers and spoke into the intercom. "Let's blow this place, Oddball. Put 'er in reverse." The Sherman came to life, backed into an alley barely large enough to accommodate it, passing under an arch. Kelly ordered Oddball to stop the engines. He listened.

As if aware of the game their prey was playing, the Tigers cut their motors. Nothing could be heard except the fall of water from the fountains and the tolling of the church bell.

The Sherman started up again, shambled backwards, round one corner and then another. The Tigers began closing in, the huge cannon extended in deadly reach.

Kelly continued to maneuver, all the while drawing the Tigers away from the bank. Ahead, Ford appeared on a rooftop, waving wildly, and shouting directions. "On the right, Kelly! A block and a half!"

Kelly jerked his head and the Sherman turned into another street. Then Cowboy popped up, clinging to a fence. "Circling left, Kelly, by the school building!"

The Sherman continued to back off, coming to a halt finally in a patio. Thirty yards away, Ford stood balanced precariously on a roof, signaling wildly. Directly to the front, Cowboy had climbed up on a tall ivy-covered wall. Beyond the wall, the growl of a

Tiger was high and constant. Cowboy raised his arm as the Tiger passed beneath him. His arm came down and he yelled, "Now, Kelly!" and jumped for safety.

Kelly shouted a command into the Sherman and ducked. Oddball slammed the tank into gear and it went bursting through the ivy-covered wall, carrying chunks of medieval brick and pipework with it. Once in the street, the Sherman veered sharply to the left.

The Tiger trundled away, its back end totally exposed, the street too narrow for it to rotate its big gun. The Sherman lurched to a stop and fired. Kelly held tightly to the turret as the machine recoiled. Again Oddball fired and again and again. The Tiger hunt was over . . .

At the sound of the Sherman's gun, Big Joe leaped out of the window and hit the cobblestones running at top speed. The two sentries saw him coming, surprise and terror on their faces. Big Joe killed them both with one long burst, fired on the move. He kept going.

From his position on the roof, Jonesy cut down the machine gunners on the bank roof before they could fire a shot.

Babra and Fortune attacked the line of trucks being repaired, shooting as they went. Some of the guards managed to return the fire. Babra skidded onto his face.

The remainder of the Germans came sprinting out of the building next to the bank. Crapgame, behind the garbage cans, opened up on them. They went down like burlesque comics taking pratfalls and didn't get up. Five shots came out of the bank window, ripped into the garbage cans. Crapgame muttered a quiet oath and fell onto his back.

Gutkowski and Penn leaped over the parapets edging the roof of the bank, pulling pins from hand gre-

nades. Gutkowski put his boot through the skylight, smashing the glass and Penn dropped his grenades through the opening. Both men flattened out on the roof and waited. Two explosions came from inside the bank. They picked themselves up.

The sounds of war ceased and the silence returned to Claremont. Big Joe stood behind one of the front pillars of the bank and looked at his watch. The entire action had taken less than thirty seconds.

In the portals of the church, the priest appeared, murmuring a prayer for the dead.

A body fell off the roof of the bank and hit the street with the dull, lifeless sound of a sack of potatoes. Gutkowski appeared at the parapet, grinning broadly.

"Get the hell out of sight!" Big Joe said.

Fortune went over to where Babra lay and said his name; he received no answer.

Fisher located Crapgame behind the garbage cans and dragged him around the corner of a building. Crapgame groaned and his breathing was harsh.

The church bell continued to toll.

Suddenly it stopped and the scream of steel on stone took its place, growing louder. A Tiger moving fast. The men of Maitland's company tried to shrink back into the bricks and mortar of the ancient walls.

At once the remaining Tiger thundered into the square, came to a halt in the center, its engine throbbing. The long gun began a slow search of the square. It made a complete circle of the shattered bank, the corpses of the German soldiers, of the unseen enemy, then stopped, trained to the front. The 600 horsepower of the superb Mayerbach motor backfired and stopped.

Once again, silence.

XVII

Nobody in the square moved. To do so would have been an invitation to disaster. The Tiger owned a gun capable of penetrating ten inches of steel from three-quarters of a mile away. And it also possessed two machine guns for smaller game.

Big Joe assessed the situation and sagged back against the pillar; he decided to think about things some more. From around the corner of the bank, Ford's head appeared. Big Joe stared at him.

"Hey, Joe," Ford said earnestly. "What are you doing?"

Big Joe wasn't sure whether to weep or swear. He said nothing.

On the other side of the bank, Fortune felt a tickle in his throat; the smell of all that cordite. He coughed.

The Tiger fired at the sound.

The shell destroyed the upper half of the building and buried Fortune in dirt and rubble. When the dust rose, he picked himself gingerly out of the litter, feeling himself tentatively.

"I only coughed," he muttered resentfully. "Is there something against coughing?"

"Hey, Joe," Ford repeated. "Whatta you gonna do?"

"Be quiet," Big Joe husked, then: "Where's Kelly?"

"You want I should find him?"

Big Joe nodded and forced a smile onto his face. He was happy when Ford withdrew.

Silence returned to the square. No one moved. No

one spoke. Until Little Joe shattered the almost pastoral quiet, shouting from the top of the church:

"Hey, Big Joe! It's the Seventh Cavalry. About four miles away and coming fast. I can see them, clear as anything. It looks like a whole regiment."

The big gun on the Tiger turned to find Little Joe, turret whining on its electric motors. The cannon elevated and depressed, as if unwilling to expend a shell on just one man.

"I think it's the whole U.S. Third Army," Little Joe screamed. "How about that!"

The Tiger's machine guns opened up sending slugs singing off the tower bell, setting up a vibration throughout the square like a giant tuning fork. Little Joe held his ears.

Taking advantage of the diversion, Big Joe made a dash for the bank. One of the machine gunners spotted him and sent a trail of bullets in his direction.

From his place on the bank roof, Gutkowski pumped a few useless rounds at the thick steel carcass of the Tiger. The rest of the men joined in and felt better for doing so; in response, the Tiger's cannon boomed and the false Palladian front of the bank disappeared in a cloud of smoke and plaster dust.

Cursing with feeling, Big Joe dived through the nearest window, Ford right behind him. The British Airman appeared, offering his hand.

"Say you chaps, I just want to express my appreciation. The way you handled things out there—"

"Later, later," Big Joe growled, pushing past him. He went into the nearest house and out the back way, Ford struggling to keep up. Big Joe pulled up short. Ahead, Crapgame lay in Fisher's arms. Big Joe hurried to them.

Crapgame's eyes rolled loosely. "Did we make it?" he said in a feeble voice.

"Not quite," Big Joe said. "There's one tank left. We haven't been able to get him."

Crapgame coughed. "Do a deal, Big Joe. Do a deal with him."

"Crapgame, they shot you. How can I do a deal with *them?*"

"Listen, Big Joe," Crapgame got out. "I'm a Republican and business is business." His eyes rolled back in his head and he was dead. Fisher closed Crapgame's eyes and stood up.

"He says his share is to go to build a pool hall on the West Side. A real healthy place, open all night. Somewhere for a guy to go when he's in trouble with his old lady . . ."

"Sure," Big Joe said. He touched Crapgame's soiled cheek. "Sure . . ."

"I got the details," Fisher added.

Big Joe straightened up, looked away. "Take out his teeth. Put them in his vest pocket. That's where he always carried them." He left to find Kelly and the Sherman. Time was running out.

Kelly pulled a dead German out of the second Tiger they had killed and tossed him to the ground. He reached inside and drew out the radio-phone. It crackled electrically. He looked down as Big Joe appeared with Cowboy and Ford. Kelly indicated the radio.

"Let's talk to the guy in the other Tiger."

"Crapgame said to do a deal with him," Big Joe offered.

"What should I say?"

Big Joe thought for a moment. "First find out whether the bastard's an officer and a gentlemen. That could screw up everything."

Kelly pressed the button that activated the radio and cleared his throat.

"Attention!" he said in German. "You in the Tiger. You are the only one who remains. You, Tank Commander, are you an officer?"

"I am a sergeant," came the reply. "The officers were in the other two tanks. What is it you wish to talk about?"

"Say that the others are all dead," Big Joe instructed Kelly.

"Your officers are dead. So are all the truck drivers and the guards."

"It saddens me to hear that," came the brusque response.

"He's sorry," Kelly translated.

"Say we got no officers either," Big Joe said. "Say can we have a little word with him, one soldier to another soldier. Say that to him."

Kelly said so. He listened, then put down the radio. "He says okay."

"Well, let's go!" Big Joe said, leading the way back into the square.

The steel hatch of the Porsche-built Tiger opened slowly and a thick, heavily constructed man appeared. His oil-smeared Bavarian face was as battered and wily as Big Joe's. His two great arms elevated him halfway out of the tank and he watched the Americans narrowly as they advanced across the square. The 110 millimeter cannon moved slowly until it pointed directly at Big Joe's belly. They all stopped.

The Bavarian sergeant studied them balefully. "Whatdaya want?"

"You speak English?" Big Joe said.

"A liddle."

Big Joe ducked under the big cannon and came up alongside the tank, hoisted himself up to where the Bavarian waited. They measured each other silently. Big Joe fumbled through his pocket until he found

some cigarettes. He gave one to the tank commander.

The Bavarian put it in his pocket. "No smoking on my tank," he explained gruffly. "The fuel system's lousy. We got gasoline everyplace."

"You been in the States ever?"

"In New Jersey three times. I am staying with my Aunt Frieda in Passaic."

"Good. So you'll understand what I'm saying to you. Mac, the war is over for you. The Seventh Cavalry's coming over the hill and in one hour's time you'll be surrounded. Now why don't you be sensible and get the hell out of here!"

The Bavarian shook his massive head. "I got orders. You know how it is. This bank isn't to fall into the hands of the American army."

"Mac, the bank is not going to fall into the hands of the American army. It is going to fall into our hands. This is a strictly private operation."

The Bavarian considered this.

"Man," Oddball called, from his place in front of the Tiger, "do you know what's in that bank?"

The Bavarian gazed at Oddball with distaste. The unkempt, unmilitary appearance, the Iron Cross dangling on his naked chest, the cavalry breeches. He turned away.

"There is sixteen million dollars worth of gold in that bank," Kelly said.

Big Joe thought of Crapgame, of what he had said: *Do a deal* . . . "And if you want a share of that gold, Mac," he said to the tank sergeant, "all you gotta do is crank this gun around and blow a hole in the safe . . ."

The Bavarian looked at Big Joe with eyes that were wintry and hostile. He put a big oily hand into the turret and an electric motor began to whine.

"So why didn't you say so before?"

XVIII

The bank doors stood securely locked in place, one hundred years old. The Tiger's gun fired and the doors were shattered, hanging in pieces on their hinges, dust and plaster descending on the gaping entrance. In the rear of the bank stood the massive safe, gleaming and impregnable. Ten feet tall, it was an existing tribute to the mechanical skill of some nineteenth-century genius. The Bavarian sergeant aimed the big cannon and fired. The lock disintegrated and the door of the safe blasted open as if made of pasteboard.

A great cheer filled the square, the sound coming from the throats of the watching townspeople. French and American flags hung from balconies and there were flowers everywhere. To one side, a brass band comprised of retired railway workers played "America the Beautiful," while a chorus of middle-aged women sang in broken English.

On the far side of the square stood the Mayor of Clarement, the city council and several important local citizens. They held miniature American flags and waved them dutifully. Trying to make himself heard over the blasting of the band, the singing of the ladies, and the cheering of the crowd, the Mayor read his address of gratitude and welcome in barely understandable English:

". . . To our brothers from across the sea . . . home of democracy . . . land of opportunity . . . bringing freedom wherever they go . . . courage . . . justice

. . . equality . . . the best traditions of civilization . . . the fight for freedom . . ."

Two German trucks had been backed up to the front of the bank and the men of Maitland's company had formed a fireman's chain from the safe to each vehicle and were passing gold bars from hand to hand in a desperate effort to complete their mission before the arrival of superior and inhibiting forces.

"Move it!" Big Joe shouted. "Move it!"

No one noticed the girl as she entered the square, the girl Kelly and the others had met in the apple orchard, the girl who had guided them for so long, the girl who had rejected them and their mission as unworthy. Her eyes were swollen and streaked, and she moved with the heaviness of someone who had walked a very long way. She was crying quietly, privately, determined to embarrass no one.

The Mayor, trailed by his official entourage, paraded across the square, advancing on Big Joe with a garland of red, white and blue flowers. He paused alongside the trucks and displayed it to the crowd; they cheered.

"In the name of the council of Claremont," the Mayor declaimed, "I welcome you, our liberators. The village is yours. There will be singing and dancing and the wine will be free . . ." He placed the garland over Big Joe's head.

Big Joe nodded his appreciation and went on passing gold bars. Then he saw the girl, standing off to one side, her face defiant and accusatory. He yelled to his men to work faster.

"What are you going to do with your share?" Gutkowski asked Penn.

"We're not out of the woods yet."

Gutkowski laughed harshly. "I'm gonna buy me a

hundred girls, a thousand girls, a million girls!" He laughed again.

Above, on the roof of the bank, Little Joe stiffened. "Hey, Big Joe!"

"Yeah?"

Little Joe pointed toward the west, then swung himself over the side and slid down the drainage pipe to the ground. "Joe," he cried. "Big Joe. They're here."

Big Joe left the line and went into the vault where Kelly, sweating and tired, was passing out gold bars. "Cavalry's here," Big Joe said. "Just coming into town."

There were four gold bars left. Kelly handed two to Big Joe and took the remaining two himself. "Let's get out of here!" Everyone ran for the trucks.

Outside, the men were loaded into the trucks on top of the piled up gold. Kelly made a last check, to determine that no love-happy soldier remained behind with the friendly and willing girls of Claremont.

Big Joe headed for the cabin of the first truck. The girl from the Orchard stood in his path. Without a word, he pulled her forward, pushed her into the cabin. Ignoring her protests, he climbed in beside her, started the engine and made ready to release the brake.

The townspeople shouted encouragement to Big Joe. He waved at them.

"They don't understand," the girl said.

"So what! They're happy, we're happy."

"You are thieves, rapists, looters."

Big Joe shifted around to face her, the battered face terrifyingly empty. "Let me tell you," he said in a low, clenched voice. "It doesn't matter about the gold. Whether it goes to kids or nuns or hospitals or is

spent at the races at Santiago. Just so long as somebody gets a kick out of it, understand. Just so it won't go to no government to spend on more bombs and more tanks, on more lousy guns. Understand me, lady, we worked for this gold, we paid our dues and we made it. We're getting back our own on this stinkin' war."

He put his big hands on the wheel and stared straight ahead. His knuckles were white and he was breathing hard.

At once the door on the other side opened and Kelly jumped in. "Hit it!" he yelled. He saw the girl and a slow, pleased grin spread across his face. "Well, *hello!* I'd given you up."

"I don't know why I'm here," she said softly.

"Let me tell you," Kelly said.

"Later, Kelly," Big Joe snarled, releasing the brake and stepping heavily on the accelerator. "Later."

The two trucks leaped across the square, gaining speed, turning into a side street and disappearing from view; the townspeople looked after them. Seconds later General Colt's jeep rolled into the square from the west; the general was on his feet, waving a handful of medals, looking for chests to pin them on.

"Where," he wanted to know, "are my heroes?"

The band promptly began to play "God Bless America" and the ladies chorus joined in. The jubilant crowd surged forward and the Mayor delivered his speech again. The general snapped to attention and gave his best West Point Salute.

Captain Maitland pushed through the crowd, went into the war torn bank and looked at the shell-battered safe. Making small, pitiful sounds back in his throat, he stepped inside. It was shockingly empty. At once the captain suffered severe stomach pains, heart palpitations, and a stabbing sensation in his colon. He

wanted to cry. In apoplectic fury and frustration, he clenched both fists, eyes rising as if seeking divine guidance, and saw scratched on the wall a short message:

KILROY WAS HERE.

On that fine autumn morning, across the French countryside, with the leaves changing color under a clean, clear sky, two battered trucks rolled away from the battle zone, their passengers a band of dirty, slovenly G.I.'s who didn't talk much. But every once in a while, one of those crud-infested faces would crack open in a wide grin and look around. And someone would grin back. Occasionally, a man would giggle, and soon all the others would be laughing. And when they rolled past the shiny, proper tanks of the Third Army, past the guys with the ties, the men in the trucks continued to laugh. They laughed for a long time.

They had a lot to laugh about.

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